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Postmodern Bodily-Politics: Liberalism in *Vineland* and Refoundation in *The Elementary Particles*

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the association between bodily/political frustration and the impossible desire for utopian satisfaction in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*. Pynchon parodies this impossibility through his portrayal of Leftist disunity during the Nixon and Reagan administrations, Houellebecq through the quest for ultimate pleasure in post-*soixante-huitard* France. Although both parodies depict disillusionment in teleological Reason, Pynchon and Houellebecq offer divergent solutions to political apathy. Anticipating Richard Rorty's thesis in *Achieving Our Country*, *Vineland* dramatizes Leftist consensus as a pragmatic means to replace communitarian teleology. In contrast, *The Elementary Particles* depicts liberalism, communitarianism, and libertarianism as fundamentally utopian and therefore self-destructive. The apocalyptic utopia of its epilogue is a metaphor for the actual end to which heteronomy, according to Cornelius Castoriadis, leads. Thus, I argue that Pynchon's liberalism and Houellebecq's implicit advocacy for ateleological refoundation are two postmodern responses to bodily and political frustration.

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Introduction

Bodily desire is a perennial subject in Western literature, philosophy, and political theory. As suggested by the title of Pascal Jourdana and Cédric Fabre's article, "De Platon à Houellebecq, l'utopie en littérature" (2000), artists, philosophers, and political theorists have been preoccupied with its *utopian* satisfaction since Plato. Indeed, the philosophical desire for correspondence between reason and reality correlates with the (pre-postmodern) literary desire for essential representation and the general political desire to reconcile, under one body-politic, individuality and collectivity. In the canonical works that Jourdana and Fabre enumerate, however, the recurrence and reworking of desire reflect the deferral of its absolute consummation over two millennia of political and philosophical activity. Within the relatively new lexicon of postmodernism, utopian desire has become synonymous with impossibility; teleological deferral entails the omnipresence of frustration. Situated in this postmodern context, the responses to frustrated desire in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) and Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* (1998) constitute two alternatives to the attendant propensity for political apathy: liberal pragmatism and philosophical refoundation, respectively.

These diametric alternatives for the moment aside, the pervasiveness of frustrated desire in both novels provides a first point of comparison. Set in 1984 America (with occasional passages in Japan), *Vineland* parodies the pursuit of utopian fulfillment through the interwoven lives of its main characters: superannuated hippie Zoyd Wheeler, his ex-wife and government informant

Frenesi, their inquisitive teenage daughter Prairie, her guardians Darryl Louise Chastain (DL) and Takeshi Fumimota, her activist grandmother Sasha Traverse, and, of course, federal prosecutor Brock Vond, whose ubiquitous influence over these and myriad other characters is the immediate source of bodily frustration in the novel. Spanning the increasingly consumeristic decades that follow the sexual revolution and the popularization of television in 1960s France, *The Elementary Particles* also parodies the quest for utopian satisfaction through the compulsive sex life of Bruno Clément, the half-brother of the comparatively hypoactive Michel Djerzinski.[1] Although Michel's work as a bio-physicist does signify an alternate and possibly prescient worldview, in that it expedites a futuristic race of clones, Houellebecq does not attribute Bruno's frustrated desire to a clear political antagonist in the way that Vond is the "expediter of most of Zoyd's years of long and sooner or later tearful nights" (50). Despite its well-documented anti-liberalism, a conventional struggle over ideological direction is absent in *The Elementary Particles*. For Houellebecq, frustration is a function of society's heteronomous foundation in Reason, whereas for Pynchon its source is more salient as a function of contemporaneous political hegemony.

As a participant in an overarching political battle for individual freedom and collective harmony, Zoyd particularly embodies, in his quest to unify his family and in his memories of their past potential, the impossibility of a liberalized American Dream during the Nixon and Reagan administrations. According to Tindall and Shi, "a cultural conservatism began to coalesce" after

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[1] For a discussion of the modernizing effect of television in France, see J. P. Rioux and J. F. François' *Histoire culturelle de la France* (1998).

the politically divisive Vietnam War "with people professing old-time virtues and eternal verities expressing rising fears that the nation had lost its national bearings" (1536). "This new breed of cultural conservatism," with which they associate the reelection of Reagan in 1984, "had lost all patience with the excesses of liberalism" (1536). Zoyd's actual dream at the start of the novel connotes the frustration of deferred liberalism in the form of "carrier pigeons from someplace far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time" (3). He understands the actual "squadron of blue jays," whose "stomping around on the roof" induces the dream and wakes him from it, "to be another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with the letter that had come along with his latest mental-disability check, reminding him that unless he did something publicly crazy . . . he would no longer qualify for benefits" (3). As Jerry Varsava argues in "Thomas Pynchon and Postmodern Liberalism" (1995), the political forces with which Zoyd contends as the novel's synecdochical liberal are specifically communitarian, proponents of which "assert that individuals are constituted by historical forces and social circumstances – in short by community" (78). Consistent with the observation that communitarian theorists "criticize the compartmentalization of life that is sanctioned by liberal political theory in pluralistic democracies," Vond, the squadron commander of these forces, disregards the liberal distinction between public and private life (79). As we shall see, he exploits the utopian desires of Zoyd and other characters by

intruding upon their private lives, the domain of dreams, to enforce public conformity.

Public conformity is paradoxically individualistic, though no less unsatisfying, in Houellebecq's post-sixties France. "One of the paradoxes of the period," according to Roger Price, "was the greater uniformity in consumption combined with a multiplication of the opportunities to express individuality in terms of dress or culture" (292-293). In a comparable observation to which I return, Michel notes that his brother will "suffer his decline and death as an individual" but that "his hedonistic worldview and the forces that shaped his consciousness and desires were common to an entire generation" (148). As one of many "*precursors*" to this generation, their mother Janine abandons them in their youth to continue a hippie lifestyle (original emphasis 20). In doing so, she divides her family in a forlorn and paradoxically libertarian quest for sexual communion. Bruno lives with his maternal grandmother until she dies in 1967 when he is eleven, five years after the death of his grandfather. His irresponsible parents subsequently enroll him in a boarding school where older boys sexually abuse him. His plastic-surgeon father occasionally provides visits that are themselves cosmetic and no substitute for absent familial support. In comparison, Michel's paternal grandmother raises him to maturity after his father removes him, at the age of three, from one of Janine's squalid communes. Three years later, in 1964, his father mysteriously disappears while filming a documentary on the Chinese occupation in Tibet. Although several critics, such as Gavin Bowd, emphasize the biographical elements of the novel – Houellebecq's communist

grandparents raised him "[w]hile his parents indulged in sexual liberation and *gauchiste* spontaneity" – I argue that Houellebecq's critique of Leftism is philosophically rather than ideologically driven (28). Where Pynchon depicts the postmodern landscape as one in which liberals need not despair because communitarian hegemony is not absolute, Houellebecq situates the landscape itself on the verge of destruction.

The alternatives to postmodern apathy in *Vineland* and *The Elementary Particles* moreover suggest two responses to a common history of philosophical determinism and its effect on socio-political phenomena, a twofold second point of comparison. Throughout this thesis, I presuppose that the American and French political environments in which Pynchon and Houellebecq locate and respond to bodily frustration rest on a Platonic worldview. That is to say, the conventional political spectrum to which American and French democracies subscribe comprises a variety of political ideologies (notably communitarianism, liberalism, and libertarianism) that operate, either pragmatically or absolutely, on Reason. In his discussion of refoundation projects, Gilles Labelle characterizes Reason as the "effort to express the meaning of Being" (78). In keeping with the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis, this teleological effort is the philosophical foundation on which the modern demos is deemed "the manifestation of reason" (78). In Castoriadis's own words, this "operative postulate [of Reason] that there is a total and 'rational' (and therefore 'meaningful') order in the world – what one could call unitary ontology – has plagued political philosophy from Plato through modern Liberalism and Marxism" ("The Greek *Polis*" 274). The two camps into

which Labelle accordingly divides contemporary political philosophy parallel the narrative directions that Pynchon and Houellebecq take from the postmodern view that reason does not express but *creates* meaning, that "human history is creation – without which," Castoriadis maintains, "there would be no genuine question of judging and choosing, either 'objectively' or 'subjectively'" (274). Anti-foundationalists contend that "democracy need not be 'founded' in order to ensure its continued existence" and foundationalists argue that "democracy cannot rest merely on the pragmatic fact of its existence in order to ensure its survival" (Labelle 77). Insofar as Pynchon posits liberalism as an effective response to frustrated desire, he pits it against alternate political ideologies on the same spectrum, the teleological nature of which he appropriates pragmatically, by virtue of its existence. The philosophical impossibility of this spectrum forms the heteronomous foundation of society that Castoriadis criticizes, and Houellebecq dramatizes, as self-destructive, hence the apocalyptic epilogue of *The Elementary Particles* in which humanity acquiesces to a new era of clones.

Although *Vineland* does not transcend spectral determinacy, its pragmatic determinism is by definition self-reflective and strategic. Discussed in detail later, the novel's literal specters – the ontologically ambiguous Thanatoids – dramatize the way in which language renders even postmodern reflection deterministic (to which Houellebecq's Comtean narrative, however parodic, is no exception). In *Vineland*, creative teleology is necessary to prevent political disorientation and to overcome submission to undesirably entrenched teleologies. Thus, Vond's communitarian teleology in which collective order predominates is

problematic for individuals but teleological significations are themselves pragmatic, of which the liberal American Dream is an example. In contrast, I shall argue, *The Elementary Particles* unsettles the conventional political spectrum in its entirety. The recreated, meta-human, species of the epilogue is a metaphor for replacing the determinacy of Reason with a creative foundation of history in which even pragmatic teleology is unsustainable for human life.

The third and final point of comparison that I explore in this thesis is the motif of body/body-politic reciprocity. This motif encapsulates both Pynchon's postmodern liberalism in its battle against communitarianism and Houellebecq's more general challenge to the politics of Reason. With regard to the former theme, Richard Rorty's notion of "intersubjective consensus," to which he opposes the "accurate representation of something nonhuman" and by which he defines "objectivity" in *Achieving One's Country* (1998), is elucidative (35). In this pragmatic sense, the reciprocity between individual bodies and the collective bodies through which they unite common desire and reconcile disparate ones enacts liberalism when it is *consensual*. Examples that I shall discuss, in my second chapter, are the consensus between Zoyd and Sasha to raise Prairie free of state-intervention and the eventual consensus between DL and Takeshi to disempower Vond through non-seditious means. In my first chapter, however, I map the frustrations that arise from the initial lack of Rortyan consensus among the political Left in *Vineland* and the related ability of the communitarian powers-that-be to maintain, often through the media, an illusive sense of *absolute* body/body-politic reciprocity.

Of course, outside this pragmatic context, the notion of consensus as intersubjectivity reverts to the mode of absolutism in which communitarianism, with its "totalizing perspective," operates (Varsava 79). Rorty seems to assume that intersubjective consensus is more or less centrist in nature as he chides postmodern criticism, in particular Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, as providing "views on practically everything except what needs to be done" (78). Moreover, the Cultural Left's "insouciant use of terms like 'late capitalism' suggest that we can wait for capitalism to collapse, rather than figuring out what, in the absence of markets, will set prices and regulate distribution" (103-104). Rorty's arguments for cultural texts that encourage political agency rather than teleological hope in Leftist ideals are solid; nevertheless, one could equally criticize the teleological connotations of his own vocabulary. Despite his unequivocal point that any consensus is contingent, not absolute, the progressive verb form in the title of *Achieving Our Country* does imply that political achievement lies ahead in some ipso facto utopia.[2] Although "deontological liberalism" (3) may lack the teleological specificity of competing ideologies, as Susan Mendus furthermore observes, "it certainly cannot remain neutral on the nature and constitution of the self," the liberal ends of which "are the outcome of the operation of free choice" (4). It is this very sense of innate freedom, by which we may achieve a desirable end if materially free to do so, that liberals presuppose and Houellebecq deems self-destructive.

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[2] For a summary of Rorty's explicitly non-teleological, or post-Hegelian, dialectic see Varsava's "Richard Rorty" (2001).

Since freedom is not innate for Houellebecq, the desire for consensual reciprocity (or mutual freedom) between the body and body-politic in *The Elementary Particles* is inherently frustrating. In contrast to its progressive function as a pragmatic telos in Pynchonian America, the idea that individuality and collectivity are reconcilable propels Houellebecq's image of French society and humanity in general toward self-induced annihilation. The three main sections of the novel chronicle Bruno's increasingly maniacal quest for sexual consummation and Michel's solitary and eventually self-destructive research, the implication of which is the demise of his relationships and humanity proper. Given these diametric yet equally bleak lives, Nature, as opposed to ideology, seemingly imbues the human body with a desire for absolute intersubjectivity that is necessary for individual and collective life (as its anomalous absence in Michel implies) and paradoxically pernicious to both (as its presence in Bruno shows). However, this thematized notion of Nature as Chaos is at once a parody of Nature as Reason and a metaphor for the destructive corollary of teleology. In my third chapter, I address the twofold theme of anthropocentric Reason as unsatisfactory resistance to Chaos and the mitigatory function of suicide (the only freedom from the oppressive freedom to pursue insatiable desire) by which Houellebecq frames societal decline as inevitable under Reason. In my related fourth chapter, I address what Houellebecq depicts, through the character of Bruno, as the self-destructiveness of political systems that operate on Reason and conclude with the Castoriadian alternative to which a metaphorical reading of the epilogue lends itself. That is, the deliberate (and literally disconcerting) end to human evolution

in the epilogue is a suggestive metaphor for an alternate, albeit non-teleological, foundation on which to base the relationship between individuals and society. According to this creative foundation, 'freedom' no longer signifies an immanent human property that, in actuality, experience denies; it corresponds to the Castoriadian notion of autonomy from frustrating heteronomy.

I wish to stress from the outset that Rortyan liberalism does not exhaust *Vineland*'s ideological possibilities, just as liberalism, communitarianism, and libertarianism are present only as different manifestations of Reason in *The Elementary Particles*. In the first instance, Rorty himself views *Vineland* as the expression of Leftist defeatism, however much he ironically "overlooks the conclusion of the novel, in which Pynchon quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of Rorty's intellectual heroes, and therein establishes proximity between his politics and Rorty's own" (Varsava 246). My intent is not to delineate and weigh the competing forms of Leftism in *Vineland*; it is to explore the presence of Rortyan consensus therein as a pragmatic alternative to the right-wing communitarianism that Vond represents. In other words, whether one reads Pynchon's politics as "rueful acquiescence in the end of American hopes" (Rorty 6) or "liberal hope [that] has undergone change . . . . in an ateleological world" (Varsava 92-93), the central conflict in the novel remains between Leftists who desire change and Vond's communitarians who conserve a repressive status quo. In addition to the division among Leftists in the novel, my point is that the greater left-right divide in Pynchonian America occurs along the same political spectrum. Again, Reason, as defined, is the traditional basis for this spectrum; nevertheless, Pynchonian

hope manifests as *pragmatic* consensus in the general effort to overcome teleological claims that reinforce communitarian oligarchy.

Similarly, I do not consider the relative merits and demerits, not to mention the myriad forms, of libertarianism, liberalism, and communitarianism per se, only their general presence in *The Elementary Particles*. Indeed, their very generality in the main body of the novel reflects Houellebecq's thesis that all political ideologies, insofar as they operate on Reason, are self-destructive in a postmodern world. "Unitary ontology, in whatever disguise," Castoriadis argues, "is essentially linked to heteronomy" ("The Greek *Polis*" 274). Implicit in my discussion of Bruno in chapter four, the aforementioned ideologies are heteronomous in their respective prescriptions for socio-political satisfaction. In general, libertarianism decrees the right to absolute *subjectivity*, communitarianism an *objectively* good social order, and liberalism, in Benjamin Barber's words, "a *bridge* that does not depend on some foundationalism conception either of right or the good," in other words, a bridge between libertarian and communitarian extremes that founds itself on Rortyan consensus (my emphasis 57). Subject, object, bridge: Bruno traverses each of these positions, each of which merely exasperates his desire for absolute satisfaction, the immanent but impossible telos of Reason. As we shall see, his ultimate lack of faith in these worldviews results in personal chaos. Humanity, after millennia of faith in unitive Reason, correspondingly disassembles in Houellebecq's futuristic epilogue.

In literal contradiction with Houellebecq's dystopian sensibility, the race of meta-human clones that ensues inhabits a communitarian utopia, the untenability of which Varsava demonstrates in "Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism" (2005). This turn of events is paradoxical because the main body of the novel overwhelmingly depicts modern political ideologies as utopian at heart and, therefore, as untenable resistance to Chaos. Notwithstanding Houellebecq's personal affinity for utopian thought that Varsava adduces, I shall consider the scientific communitarianism of the epilogue not as a literal "utopian resolution" that "the human race has achieved . . . to its purported centuries-long slide into anomie, misery, and despair," but as a metaphor for ineluctable decline under Reason in a chaotic/ateleological world (146). Moreover, Houellebecq plays on the notion of telos as end. The epilogue's utopia (the end of the novel) coincides with the literal end of humanity. Teleological pursuit results in frustration and, ultimately, a moribund species. In this sense, Houellebecqian play merges with Castoriadis's argument that modern society must recreate itself on non-teleological grounds if humans are to overcome the frustrations of determinacy. If all human history is creation, as he maintains, "a neofascist regime" can impose our standard of living or "this can be done freely by the human collectivity, organized democratically, cathecting other significations, abolishing the monstrous role of the economy as end and putting it back in its rightful place as mere *means* to human life" ("Done and To Be Done" 417). A literal reading of the epilogue does suggest that Houellebecq's own foundational

preference, as a final solution to frustration, is neofascist. My point is that a metaphorical reading, inasmuch as Houellebecq's humanity collectively decides to free itself from teleological desire, gives preference to foundationalist over anti-foundationalist philosophy.

In sum, both *Vineland* and *The Elementary Particles* respond to the preponderance of frustrated desire in comparable political and philosophical contexts. Where Pynchon looks to ideological change for a solution, Houellebecq envisions a necessary metaphysical revolution. Again, I will not concern myself with the literal implications of the genetic revolution that he proposes, only with the metaphorical implication of the proposal itself. Thus, on the one hand, Houellebecq paradoxically appropriates the vocabulary of Reason; his metaphorical epilogue is an attempt to make present (re-present) a non-teleological foundation that is in fact absent in modern society. On the other hand, he must do so in order to advocate this new foundation. In "The Contingency of Language" (1986), Rorty observes that the "trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honoured vocabulary [such as Reason] is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary" (4). With this in mind, Houellebecq's creative appropriation of Reason – his use of metaphor to invoke a future that is unencumbered by the telos of Reason – is as unreasonable as the plot's meta-human solution to human frustration. Rorty's liberal politics aside, his pragmatic view of philosophy frees creative thought from the burden of absolute coherency insofar as

> [i]nteresting philosophy is never an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis, but, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things. (4)

Houellebecq portrays the discourse of Reason not only as a nuisance but as deleterious to humanity. As such, its pragmatic and hopeful usage in *Vineland* and its ultimate subordination to Chaos in *The Elementary Particles* allow for an interesting comparison between two philosophical responses to frustration in a postmodern context.

Chapter I: Frustrated Desire as a Political Problem in *Vineland*

The first overt reference to political failure in *Vineland* occurs in chapter one. The narrator, highlighting the disparity between television reality and actual experience, intimates Zoyd's disappointment with what Van Meter, friend and former band member, "still described as a commune":

> Zoyd had watched television shows about Japan, showing places like Tokyo where people got into incredibly crowded situations but, because over the course of history they'd all learned to act civil, everybody got along fine despite the congestion. So when Van Meter, a lifetime searcher for meaning, moved into this Cucumber Lounge bungalow, Zoyd had hoped for some Japanese-style serenity as a side effect, but no such luck. Instead of a quiescent solution to all the overpop, the "commune" chose an energetic one – bickering. (9)

Associated with this bungalow wherein bicker "an astounding number of current and ex-old ladies, ex-old ladies' boyfriends, children of parent combinations present and absent, plus miscellaneous folks in out of the night" (9) is the phallically suggestive "high agitation" (8) of the mafia-run Cucumber Lounge, whose rotating sign is a "huge green neon cucumber with blinking warts, cocked at an angle that approached, within a degree or two, a certain vulgarity" (12). Thus, from the start, Pynchon likens the Leftist subculture in *Vineland* to an indefinite state of priapism, a theme of agitating and dissatisfactory political

*de*rection which falls (or arises) under one of the novel's more pervasive motifs, the conceptual reciprocity of *body* and *body-politic*.

The symbolic association between bodily functions (chief among which is sexual desire in *Vineland*) and the functioning of political systems has a long history in Western literature. To cite one example, in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), Athenian and Spartan men withstand (sexually induced) priapism until they agree to their wives' ultimatum to end the Peloponnesian War or forever suffer conjugal denial. In his introductory essay to the comedy, Jeffery Henderson argues that Aristophanes' object had been political, namely to espouse "reconciliation at home and abroad in the form of a return to the polity and prosperity of the good old days" (xxv). Accordingly, the combatants eventually lay down their arms for their wives, whose reopening of the previously impenetrable Acropolis coincides with the sexual and political satisfaction of the play's denouement (quite literally, its falling action).

Despite its canonical status, the reoccurring correlation between body and body-politic in *Vineland* exceeds the literary historicism that underlies it, which is to say the "historical sense" that T. S. Eliot ascribes to "creative genius" (1092-1093). More than a traditional objective correlative for political motivation, bodily desire itself shapes the politics to which Pynchon's characters subscribe as much as the (predominantly) American system of power, in which their desire functions, influences their desired subscription. This chiasm, according to which desire and politics affect each other, is central to my analysis of *Vineland* and I return to it in more detail as it applies to the character of Zoyd. For the moment,

if we accept Eliot's definition of an objective correlative in "Hamlet and His Problem" (1920) as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked," then political motivation, to the extent that it is the desire for intersubjectivity, is also an objective correlative for individual desire (7). In other words, the body and its politics are reciprocal concepts in *Vineland.*

Although such reciprocity abounds in the Western canon, and which modern novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) foreground, two important effects stem from Pynchon's more frequent reference to contemporaneous popular culture in *Vineland.* First, the reciprocity between Zoyd's desire to reunite with his ex-wife Frenesi and the political environment which stifles his efforts becomes more pronounced when, in the absence of direct allusion to a canonical figure, his frustration does not simply symbolize political frustration but is itself that frustration (a point to which I return). This effect alone may not sway critics such as Joseph Slade and David Cowart who respectively opine that *Vineland*'s television references are "numerous enough to turn off academic audiences" (68) and that in general its "density of reference to the ephemera of popular culture is almost numbing" (186).[3] Indeed, more allusions to comparable literary figures like Bernard Marx in *Brave New World* would universalize, perhaps more clearly, the tension between Zoyd's individual desires and the communal restrictions upon

[3] M. K. Booker cites these lines in "American and Its Discontents: The Failure of Leftist Politics in Pynchon's Vineland" (93, 94).

them; however, the novel would lose its second effect. That is, the sheer inundation of popular American culture in *Vineland*, insofar as popular culture privileges the contemporary over historical consciousness, reflects an historical ignorance which M. K. Booker describes as "just another element in the lack of theoretical awareness that brought the revolutionaries of the sixties to their downfall" (89). Though ignorance in general serves the interests of totalitarian authority, against which these revolutionaries had fought and *Vineland* warns, its ubiquity owes much to that of the popular media, our near constant exposure to which is a particular phenomenon of postwar globalization. The references to popular culture in the novel highlight the particularity of this ignorance, of which Zoyd's television-induced hope for communal serenity is an instance.

This is not to say that popular culture is *necessarily* subservient to the cultural hegemony in which it circulates, and more often than not reinforces, as a commercial product. In the passage quoted above, the television documentary that evokes false hope in Zoyd also explicates, however implicitly, its falsity. In contrast to 1984 America, communal harmony prevails in Japan "because over the course of history they'd all learned to act civil" (9). In "Japan, Creative Masochism and Transnationality in *Vineland*" (2003), Terry Caesar and Takashi Aso argue that the novel "exhibits itself as a text intricately aware of (if not – as we shall see – entirely free from) the moment of naïve idealism in a 60's version of Orientalism, whereby the Spirit of the East is posited as an alternative to . . . Western 'karmic imbalances'" (375). Although Zoyd's expectation for "Japanese-styled serenity" is unquestionably naïve, the documentary itself cites

education and its concomitant, historical consciousness, as prerequisites for widespread civility (9). In the absence of such reasoning, whose suppression television and other popular media generally (and in this case ironically) exasperate, the liberal virtue of civility is found lacking in Van Meter's commune. His would-be haven represents one of the many Leftist "attempts to work against [governmental] repression [that] often played directly into the hands of the powers-that-be" (Booker 88).

It would seem, therefore, that potentially edifying content in popular culture is in fact irrelevant, that it is wholly subservient to hegemonic forces whose dependence upon an ignorant populace the popular media secure, that, in the words of Marshal McLuhan, not the content but "the medium is the message" (7). In this sense, *Vineland* supports McLuhan's argument in *Understanding Media* (1964) that electric media will undo the manner in which (Western) humans perceive themselves as individuals. Sensory overload forces the otherwise individual mind to project it*self* onto electric media, thereby cutting consciousness off from the body, triggering, moreover, "the autoamputative power or strategy [that] is resorted to by the body when the perceptual power cannot locate or avoid the cause of irritation" (42). In this instance, the body becomes "the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image," the latter in reference to the alluring yet self-destructive reflection of Narcissus (41).

In *Vineland*, Hector Zuñiga and Frenesi Gates exemplify servomechanism, respectively as an agent for the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) who suffers "Tubal abuse" and as a Leftist film-maker who prostitutes her politics for the

Department of Justice (DOJ) (33). For them, television and film are (despite technological differences) comparable media in whose respective service and delusory content they lose themselves at the expense of reality. Their actions, for example, impede liberal efforts to reclaim individual rights in postmodern America, a political war zone in which liberalism "is fighting for its life" (Varsava 65). Analogous to the fate of Narcissus, which for McLuhan symbolizes the death of the individual in the servomechanic age of electric media, Hector and Frenesi are oblivious to their sexual and political suicides. As expendable pawns who think of themselves as participants, they pursue the illusory (and only superficially different) images of which, ipso facto, they are unrequited lovers.

Notwithstanding the real threat of autoamputation in *Vineland*, the novel acknowledges the ability of the sentient mind to manipulate media to its individual ends, which in effect tempers what amounts to determinism on McLuhan's part. While opposing General David Sarnoff's conviction that the "products of modern science are neither good nor bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value," McLuhan must overstate to emphasize a local insight. He begins by rephrasing Sarnoff's position:

> That is, if the slugs reach the right people firearms are good. If the TV tube fires the right ammunition at the right people it is good. I am not being perverse. There is simply nothing in the Sarnoff statement that will bear scrutiny, for it ignores the nature of the medium, of any and all media, in the true Narcissus style of one

> hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form. (11)

Vineland adopts a reasonable consensus: television and film *do* hypnotize, and in this way mediate (either directly or inadvertently) state power, but not invariably. Their malleable content also provides a means of resistance, which anticipates John Fisk's thesis in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1991) that popular culture, from television to designer jeans, "bears within it signs of power relations" (4) and expresses "both power and resistance" (5).

According to Fiske, complacent readers, in contradistinction to McLuhan's somnambulistic viewers, "fail to activate" the contradictory power relations immanent in cultural media, whereas resistant readers succeed (44). On the one hand, Zoyd is complacent with authority as he fails to activate the empowering content in the aforementioned documentary. The false expectation that he derives from "Japanese-style serenity" furthermore underscores a level of ignorance that benefits the American powers-that-be (9). Unable in this case to differentiate between television and reality, he becomes powerless to realize communal serenity beyond that which the government tolerates. On the other hand, the subtle distinction between ignorant complacency and invariable hypnosis is clear when Zoyd appropriates the experience of the game-show contestant in order to frame his resistance to the DEA in terms that are meaningful to him, however tenuous that resistance may be. In light of his drug-informant "virginity," which "the li'l fucker" Hector "had been trying [to take] over the years to develop him as a resource," Zoyd defines his vulnerability as follows:

> one day, just to have some peace, he'd say forget it, and go over. Question was, would it be this time, or one of the next few times? Should he wait for another spin? It was like being on "Wheel of Fortune," only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel, to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn't want to read anyway. (12-13)

Wheeler's fortune under federal surveillance, though largely out of his hands, only partially stems from the autoamputation to which media, and for that matter marijuana, render him susceptible. The central causes of his political frustration are implicit in the sexual images with which Pynchon describes his "romance" with Hector, for whom their relationship is "at least as persistent as Sylvester and Tweety's" (22). In contrast to Hector, whose television addiction parallels Zoyd's drug use, Zoyd more readily projects his consciousness upon *human* media than television or film. His sexual frustration directly arises from the real world of politics.

The human body in *Vineland* is the primary medium through which bodily and political desire reciprocate to the point of becoming one. Just as media-induced autoamputation and complacency aid and abet those in power, "sexuality is more often effectively used as a tool of official power than as a form of insurrection" (Booker 91). One may add that sexuality, under the rubric of desire, is the *most* effective medium of power in *Vineland.* Personified by federal

prosecutor Brock Vond, the United States under Nixon and Regan is a prison-state whose ball and chain is "anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that" (Pynchon 313). Ubiquitous yet frequently invisible, state power exerts its influence through the body whose desires it exploits, using the lure of the orgasm to circumscribe potential sedition within its authoritarian reach. Thus, when revolutionary desire erupts on the College of Surf campus, Vond orchestrates his offensive through the body of Frenesi, the lover of prominent revolutionary Weed Atman. Later echoed in DL's suspicion that Frenesi's body is simply a medium through which patriarchal power makes itself "look normal and human so the boys can go on discreetly porkin' each other" (266), Vond arrogantly tells Frenesi: "You're the *medium* Weed and I use to communicate, that's all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places" (my emphasis 214). For Vond, the medium is not the message but a messenger for state power.

So entwined are political authority and bodily desire that Vond need not physically confront Weed to disengage his body-politic, The People's Republic of Rock and Roll (PR^3). Vond is "happy to leave" Weed's body to Frenesi in exchange for "his spirit" (213). That is, Weed's revolutionary spirit lies not in his physical prowess but in the "innocent enough" freedom with which he acts "without hidden plans, with no ambitions beyond surmounting what the day brought each time around . . . lurching on happily into his new identity as a man of action, embracing it as only an abstract thinker would" (216). Such

transparency in thought and willingness to act accordingly pose the greatest threat to the opaque and oppressive forms of authoritarianism of which Vond is the incarnation. Messianic in comparison to the Foucauldian subject who, free from material constraint, "is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself," Weed's spirit transcends what Foucault calls "the soul [that] is the prison of the body" (30). By this famous assertion, Foucault means the ethereal phenomenon that constitutes "the effect and instrument of a political anatomy" inasmuch as individual bodies internalize the power of the hegemonic body-politic to which they are subservient (30). Given the communitarian body that subjugates most individual desire in *Vineland*, the narrator rightly observes that with Weed "gone and the others scrambling after the greenbacks in Vond's safe, PR^3 would fall apart" (216).

Before I map in more detail the reciprocity between Zoyd's sexual frustration and his political failure, I wish to stress that it is not the concept of reciprocity itself against which *Vineland* defends liberalism. Where Vond's communitarianism enforces collectivity to its extreme and reactionary libertarianism pursues the individualistic end of the left-right spectrum, liberalism instead acknowledges "the public/private distinction" and, in seeking a consensus, accepts "the dispersion of political power and the inevitable political contingency pluralism brings with it" (Varsava 65). As such, liberal philosophy strives to reconcile, rather than conflate as communitarianism and libertarianism do, the ontological differences between collectivity and individuality. (It is this very reconciliation that Michel Houellebecq deems philosophically and politically

untenable, and for which *The Elementary Particles* anticipates a new political vocabulary.) For now, I wish to stress that, in *Vineland*, communitarian conflation determines the paradoxical chiasm that I state above in terms of reciprocal objective correlatives. Bodily desire shapes politics (whether Frenesi's libertarianism, Zoyd's liberalism, or Vond's communitarianism) as much as the communitarian power-structure therein frustrates a given character's politics and, what amounts to the same thing, his or her bodily desire.

One may reduce Zoyd's bodily desire to the ontological tendencies to which I refer above, namely individuation and collectivism. Together, these tendencies embody the "anticonformist mood" toward communitarianism that Varsava ascribes to the sixties' youth whose "new orthodoxy pays homage to a new holy trinity – drugs, sex, and rock 'n roll" (85). Fundamentally disparate, both tendencies are equally strong in Zoyd and necessitate a consensual middle-ground wherein his consciousness may reside peacefully. Inasmuch as he desires collective unity and requires a compatible social environment in which to pursue this and more individualistic ends, his bodily desire reciprocates with those political desires that by definition he shares with others (such as the freedom to raise his child without governmental interference and to smoke pot with legal, if not physiological, impunity). In this regard, Zoyd's bodily desire *is* his political desire.

Though not in this reconciliatory sense, reciprocity between body and politics also applies to Zoyd's nemesis, Vond, whose sexual obsession to dominate Frenesi parallels his ambition to ascend the ranks of America's

communitarian oligarchy. He desires to live on "that level where everybody knew everybody else, where however political fortunes below might bloom and die, the same people, the Real Ones, remained year in and year out, keeping what was *desirable* flowing their way" (my emphasis 276). To this egomaniacal end, Vond appropriates the desires of those whose (physical and political) bodies are beneath him, which reflects what David Thoreen views as "the Reagan administration's systematic attempts to extend its authority while avoiding responsibility" (49). In the novel, authoritarian recklessness especially manifests in the Oklahoma City hotel room where Vond lays both Frenesi and his plans for Weed Atman's assassination. While a looming storm overhead evokes in Frenesi a (frustrated) desire for Vond's embrace, for "more than his cock," he callously watches "as if the Beast opposite the city were a coming attraction he had grown overfamiliar with" (212). The association is apt: a "brutal, fascist Brock" preys upon Frenesi and others, luring them with their own desire in order to keep potentially seditious energy flowing to his advantage (217). He embodies the "Cosmic Fascist" who Frenesi's mother, Sasha Traverse, fears "had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control" (83). As such, his dominance over Frenesi reciprocates with his storm-like dominance over *Vineland*'s political landscape, what Kathryn Hume calls "fascist surveillance superimposed on democracy and reeducation camps visible out of the corner of the eye" (419), what Thoreen, furthermore, reads as America's shift "from democracy to dictatorship" (48).

Elaine Scarry's definition of "absolute authority" in "Consent and the Body: Injury, Departure, and Desire" (1990) encapsulates the dictatorial power to which Vond aspires and against which Zoyd must struggle to reclaim the body/body-politic equation from communitarianism (880). In this article by which she contributes to the larger question of consent in the nuclear era, Scarry draws from medicine, political philosophy, and marriage law "in order to identify a recurring set of structural elements" of which "the material anchoring of consent in the body," she deems, "is most crucial" (868). In each of these three spheres, consent implies authority over

> one's own body – in fact by having absolute authority over what can touch, or pass across, the boundaries of one's own person, and conversely, to be able to exercise authority over the world space in which one places or displaces oneself, one has just gained absolute authority vis à vis the rest of the world. (880)

The fully consensual body thus comprises: first, "the thing protected;" second, "the lever across which rights are generated, political self-authorization achieved;" third, "the agent and expression of consent, the site of the performative;" and fourth, "a ratifying power" (887). All of these, she argues, "are what are jeopardized if consent is, as in a nuclear arms, lost" (887). Similarly, by denying the political environment in which bodily desire may function without excessive restriction, communitarianism repeatedly confiscates consent from the individual body and subjects it to the hegemonic consent of the *political* body. With regard to *Vineland*, the degree to which Vond exerts state

power (paradoxically to his own individualistic end) enables him to control Zoyd's physical body, to affect his political behaviour, and to frustrate thereby his most basic political and individual desires.

Of the four components that the body comprises for Scarry, its status as "a ratifying power," which is to say its "ability to consummate and willingness to consummate," is most pertinent to Zoyd's character (886). His relationship to Frenesi and the political causes of its tumultuousness are two objective correlatives by which *Vineland* simultaneously evokes sexual and political frustration. Through its sensory imagery, the novel foregrounds sexual consummation as the effect of a social harmony whose permanence communitarian oppression overwhelmingly denies the individual body. The political body that Vond represents only grants satisfaction under politically expedient, and always transitory, conditions.

For a brief period in "the Mellow Sixties, a slower-moving time, predigital, not yet so cut into pieces, not even by television," and prior to his introduction to Vond, Zoyd approaches a level of political transcendence in marriage to Frenesi for which and for whom he pines throughout the novel (38). Alan Wilde criticizes this transcendence as "the ideal in the lifetime of his characters [by which] Pynchon betrays again his nostalgia" (171) and refuses "the existential commitment [that *Vineland*] ponders only to evade" (180). Wilde moreover rejects, as an antidote to political division in 1984, the "ideal of simplicity and wholeness . . . that *Vineland* intermittently locates in the decade of light and love" (172). With respect to love, and implicitly to the (synthetic) light

of Reason, Scarry makes the complementary point that even "the most intense exclusivity of passion (the realm of shared desire, con-sentir, consenting adults) does not ensure a reciprocity of volition or eliminate the categories of domination and subordination" (886). But the prevalence of existential frustration in *Vineland* does not reflect Pynchon's refusal or inability to synthesize these categories. Zoyd's immediate frustration, for example, is political, not ontological in nature. Seeming transcendence aside, he will learn "what a stupid question it was" to ask Frenesi if "love can save anybody" on their wedding day (39). Their "gentle, at peace" wedding contrasts starkly with "[w]ar in Vietnam, murder as an instrument of American politics, black neighborhoods torched to ashes and death, all [of which] must have been off on some other planet" (38). Once Vond disillusions him to the real presence of this "other planet" that is communitarian America, Zoyd deems any philosophical "reconciliation with reality" impossible until "the State withers away," which is to say the oligarchic reality of the Real Ones whom Vond covets (28). Unlike Scarry, Pynchon does posit the possibility of interpersonal (and in this sense political) reciprocity through the consummation of desire, however much its momentary attainment, as on Zoyd's wedding day, remains contingent upon historico-political forces. As an odious trough in the "wave of History," communitarian power arrogates the reconciliatory potential of which sexual consummation in marriage is an effect and example (27). In this sense I agree with Yves-Marie Léonet that the novel "puts new questions to postmodern writers and readers; questions which are definitely not epistemological or ontological (although these issues are present in

Vineland too) but political, ethical even" (135). It is just as simplistic, Léonet suggest, to "denounce the radical political content of the book on the ground that it is mere nostalgia for the anti-establishment counterculture of the 60s or ignore the politics to simply enjoy that latest Pynchonian eccentricities of style" (135). For Pynchon, communal harmony is not simply the nostalgic ideal as Wilde argues but a pragmatic, liberal telos.

Both indirectly and directly, communitarianism in Pynchonian America pits the liberal's individual desire for sexual consummation against its reciprocal, namely the desire for body/body-politic reciprocity, quite literally *in order* to achieve its own version of social normalcy. Vond, whom Varsava dubs as the novel's synecdochical communitarian, titillates his subjects with the promise of consummation that, under his authority, is always contingent upon political subordination. In Zoyd, such titillation first occurs indirectly through his desire for Frenesi, whose phenotypic "uniform fetish" is Sasha's (genetic) explanation for their mutual and direct attraction to authority (83). Frenesi's consequent propensity for "masturbating to Ponch and Jon reruns on the Tube" more than illustrates how Reagan's "*real* revolution" (83) reduces, according to Hector, Leftist efforts to a paltry "hand-job" (27). The authoritarian power that attracts her to Vond and away from the Leftist principles of her maternal history also relegates Zoyd to a lifetime of physical and political masturbation.

Frenesi's and Zoyd's post-divorce encounter in a Honolulu hotel foreshadows this sexual disappointment (and concomitant political priapism) that an absent Vond soon induces as the direct "expediter of most of Zoyd's years of long and

sooner or later tearful nights" (50). As Frenesi heads toward the shower, Zoyd transubstantiates into a "ghostly peeper" who is "able only to fine-tune the way the steam came and went around her body" (60). While he masturbates to this fantasy, "to the only future they would have," he does not notice that Frenesi "in reality" repacks her bags immediately and checks out (60). Earlier in the novel, but later in life, Zoyd tells Prairie of his outer-body ability by which he visits her mother at night, "like Mr. Sulu laying in coordinates, only different" (40). Rather than autoamputate himself as Frenesi does herself – in both senses of the verb – through television reruns, Zoyd employs its content to explain how he must enter the world of ghosts to displace his sexual desire, to *lay* in the coordinates of a fantasy to which cannabis hallucination no doubt contributes. The corollary of this process is his out-of-political-body experience that defers the return of liberalism and thereby effects his political frustration.

Sexual displacement soon corresponds to geographical displacement for Zoyd, which further illustrates the way in which communitarianism manipulates the reciprocity between his bodily and political desires. In contrast to the "reverse presence" in Honolulu by which Vond indirectly exerts his power over Zoyd, he directly frustrates Zoyd's physical and political body upon his discovery that Frenesi has given birth to Prairie (58). For Vond, procreation itself threatens the hyperreal (and quite Baudrillardian) permanence of the "falsely deathless perimeter" into which he lures Frenesi (293). In an effort to sustain this perimeter, he has Hector plant a block of marijuana in Zoyd's residence in order to blackmail him with the threat of incarceration. Against his consent and strong

desire to reunite as a family, not to mention his desire to continue smoking pot, Vond personally compels Zoyd to sequester himself and baby Prairie from Frenesi or share a prison cell with a murderer whose "favorite pastime is attempting to insert his oversized member into the anus of the nearest white male" (301), a threat that is reminiscent of Weed Atman's revolutionary epiphany, the "throb of fear [that] went right up his asshole . . . [as] the true nature of police was being revealed to him" (207). The ultimatum furthermore reiterates the control-function of "federal advice" about which Zoyd retorts to Hector: "we know already how much all you Reaganite folks care about the family unit, just from how much you're always fuckin' around with it" (31). Just as Hector's servomechanism cuts himself off from reality to the point that his wife divorces him, and just as "Frenesi's mental construction of a simulated 'movie-world' is obviously an effort to insulate her conscience from the guilt she feels for betraying Weed," Vond pursues his own "self-delusory" vision at the expense of the real political landscape around him (Varsava 87). Moreover, the pedestal upon which he places the Real Ones, and to which he himself aspires, is in fact a simulacrum, what Baudrillard describes as a "map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory . . . whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map" (original emphasis 1). In *Vineland*, it is liberal territory that rots across a communitarian map as Vond frustrates Zoyd's mutual bodily and political desires.

Chapter II: Liberal Potential as Pynchon's Political Solution

Following his analogy of simulacra as maps that precede real territories, Baudrillard argues that simulacra are in fact "no longer a question of either maps or territories" with their "imaginary coextensivity" but that "genetic miniaturization . . . is the dimension of simulation" (2). Simulation now occurs at the level of "miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control," which together produce "a hyperreal" that "threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (2-3). Although the image loses all equivalence to its (prima facie) referent in this "hyperspace without atmosphere," Baudrillard acknowledges a reality that *is* threatened, a territory that does erode amidst simulacra (2). The Vietnam War, for example,

> is no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum – the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead and former combatants are worth the same as in other wars. What no longer exists is the adversity of the adversaries, the reality of antagonistic causes, the ideological seriousness of war. And also the reality of victory or defeat, war being a process that triumphs well beyond these appearances. (37-38)

The image, which "has no relation to any reality whatsoever," effaces more than the ontological and epistemological categories of self-expression and objective representation (6). Dramatized in *Vineland* as Frenesi documents the assassination of Weed Atman, our descriptions of the world are lethally indifferent to its unmediated existence. Just as the "murderous power" of

simulacra destroys the reality principle for Baudrillard, the reason for which fellow revolutionary Rex kills Atman finds no reference in any essential reality; he shoots him because, according to the logic of Vond's and Frenesi's simulated war, Atman is a traitor (5).

The fact that our descriptions of reality are lethally indifferent to it problematizes *Vineland*'s appeal to liberalism. If descriptions, let alone political visions, are murderous simulacra, what will prevent the erosion of reality under liberal governance? Rorty inverts this line of thought to save liberalism from the fate of inadvertently killing its political object (the fate of Oedipus to which Rex's name alludes). In "The Contingency of Language" (1986), he reaffirms his position "that *reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it*, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary" (my emphasis 3). Such Deweyan pragmatism allows Rorty to dismiss as impractical the correspondence theory of truth which finds its logical conclusion in Derridean thought and Baudrillardian lamentations for an eroded world. As he puts it in *Achieving Our Country*,

> objectivity is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, not of accurate representation of something nonhuman. Insofar as human beings do not share the same needs, they may disagree about what is objectively the case. But the resolution of such disagreement cannot appeal to the way reality, apart from any human need, really is. The resolution can only be political: one must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate these

> various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are. (35)

The widening of consensus abounds in *Vineland* and particularly characterizes the respective relationships of Zoyd and Sasha and DL and Takeshi Fumimota. Against the inhuman forces of communitarianism (and their dissemination through nonhuman simulacra that seemingly reify Foucauldian power), the consensus of these characters sets up liberalism as *Vineland*'s solution to frustrated bodily and political desire.

Interestingly, Rorty himself sees no political merit in *Vineland.* In *Achieving Our Country*, he contrasts the vibrant Cultural Left with the politically ineffectual Left in America, to whose ineffectuality, he asserts, Pynchon contributes. The Left's political demise correlates with its belief "that giant corporations, and a shadowy behind-the-scenes government acting as an agent for the corporations, now make all the important decisions" (5). According to Rorty, this belief, though plausible, is politically incapacitating and it finds expression in contemporary American fiction like *Vineland.* "Novels like Stephenson's, Condon's, and Pynchon's," he maintains, "are novels not of social protest but rather of rueful acquiescence in the end of American hopes" (6). Along with those of Silko and Mailer, their novels "are our equivalent of Adam's resigned pessimism" (10). To use the terminology of Marxism, whose telos Rorty rejects, pessimism in the superstructure reinforces communitarian control over the politico-economic infrastructure in which Leftists, as in Van Meter's lounge, bicker amongst themselves. Reminiscent of Benjamin's argument for the

revolutionary potential of the superstructure, Rorty suggests that cultural optimism will motivate Leftists to align America's politico-economic base with liberal principles.

Certainly, the ease with which Vond manipulates Frenesi, plots Atman's death, bribes PR[3] into extinction, and blackmails Zoyd connotes pessimism in terms of a desired liberal direction, but the novel does not therefore amount to rueful acquiescence.[4] N. Katherine Hayles, conversely, adduces "Brock's fear" of procreation, which "represents hope turned inside out, for it hints that transitions in both directions are possible" (20). Hayles identifies "two antagonistic force fields" in *Vineland*, the optimistic "kinship system" that Vond abhors and his "snitch system" that comprises "networks of government agents that seek to gain information, incarcerate dissidents, and control the population" (15). The endurance of the kinship system in *Vineland* supports, while its vulnerability to the snitch system temporizes, Rorty's call for optimistic solidarity among American Leftists.

Implicit in Hayles' kinship system is the body/body-politic motif through which Pynchon explores liberal consensus as an effective alternative to communitarianism. Regarding the relationship between Zoyd and his (ex) mother-in-law, Hayles observes that, "[d]espite the long-standing enmity between them, they realize that in a custody battle the judge would find little to choose between Zoyd's doper life-style and Sasha's communist past," for which reason "they share responsibility and, increasingly, affection" (17). Consensus reconciles the reciprocity between their selfish desires to raise Prairie

[4] Rorty does not quote from *Vineland*, as he does other novels, to support his assertions.

independently of each other and their collective desire to circumvent "losing the child to a government agency – having her circulate among the snitch rather than the kinship system" (17). The fact that they achieve this goal through consensus furthermore anticipates Rorty's thesis in *Achieving Our Country* that the cultural New Left must open relations with the reformist Old Left if they are to overcome political conservatism democratically. Thus, insofar as Leftist consensus is a precondition for progressive action, *Vineland*'s political trajectory is consistent with Rortyan liberalism. In spite of the constraints of communitarianism, moribund musician (cultural Leftist) and repressed revolutionary (reformist Leftist) harness the liberal potential to satisfy their desires collectively. In reference to Sasha's family reunion to which Zoyd attends with Prairie, Eric Solomon puts it as follows: "new generations gather to touch the older dream, to discover a safe harbor in Roosevelt's – not Nixon's, not Reagan's – 'Vineland the Good'" (165).

Conversely, and ironically, Frenesi internalizes communitarian simulacra and power in order to evade the demand of the Other, the very demand for which Sasha and Zoyd must reach a consensus. The irony specifically lies in the paradoxicality of communitarianism, which by definition privileges communal over individual rights yet proclaims transcendence from the intersubjective/political contingency that living in commune implies. To the detriment of those around her, Frenesi entertains her "dangerous vice," namely her tendency to make believe "that she was on her own, with no legal history, no politics, only an average California chick, invisible, poised at life's city limits, for

whom anything was still possible" (236). Deceit and betrayal follow as she pursues individual desire to its extreme. Atman's wife, Jinx, suspects that Frenesi is "close to her husband from motives other than sexual," an anxiety that she communicates to DL through their common body-politic (237). Where Frenesi increasingly uses her body to veil inner motives, most of Jinx's and DL's

> communicating was by way of their bodies – when they talked it was strangely roundabout, reluctant. But they saw, ghostly, denied, protected, another Frenesi, one they were prohibited access to. It hurt more for DL, of course – she might've expected it from a lover, but hell, they'd been *partners*. (original emphasis 237)

Given the reciprocity between DL's body and her liberal politics, when Frenesi indulges in excessive individualism, partnership and partner suffer.

For three reasons, Frenesi's and DL's partnership especially shapes the liberalism that Pynchon develops through bodily imagery: it exemplifies the body/body-politic motif, provides motivation for unsuccessful sedition, and its failure leads to successful consensus. In the first instance, their relationship, which DL compares to that of Superman and Lois Lane, is both political and sexual. DL's ninja techniques constitute a kind of superpower, and clear *deus ex machina*, as she weaves invisibly through security to save Frenesi from hostile riot police and, later, Vond's Political Reeducation Program (PREP). Note that lesbian desire is implicit in the first intercession during which DL whisks Frenesi away on a motorcycle:

> [w]ith her bare thighs Frenesi gripped the leather hips of her benefactor, finding that she'd also pressed her face against the fragrant leather back – she never thought it might be a woman she hugged this way. . . . [A]nd the scent of DL's sweat and pussy excitation diffused out of the leather clothing, mixed with motor smells. (117-118)

It follows that DL's hurt, which arises from Frenesi's political betrayal, is also the pain of unrequited love. Bodily desire reciprocates with political desire to provide motivation for sedition, the second reason for which their relationship shapes Pynchonian liberalism. She sets out to exact revenge *upon* Vond, the subjugator of Frenesi's body who is "driven to fetishism" for prostitutes who resemble Frenesi after she leaves him (141). DL disguises herself accordingly in what amounts to an unsuccessful death-trap, a botched plan for him to be "caught [as she is] inside the image of one she'd loved, been betrayed by" (141). Vond sends a body double, Takeshi Fumimota, who unknowingly receives The Ninja Death Touch while DL, wearing the ill-fitted lenses of a dead prostitute, blindly copulates him.

The implications of its failure for the moment aside, DL's attempt to assassinate Vond further locates America's political war in the body. As with PR^3, Pynchon explores political activism through the seditious body. Since the body's reciprocal is its political correlative, a fundamental disunity between Vond's desire for Frenesi and DL's consequent hatred for him initially tempts her to fight communitarian power from outside the system through which it

disseminates (the mafia even provides her with the opportunity to assassinate him). Here Pynchonian and Rortyan liberalism seemingly diverge, as Rorty advocates change through legislation rather than sedition. Conversely, DL's assassination attempt is another instance in which *Vineland* anticipates Fisk, who deems efficacious resistance to hegemony analogous to guerrilla warfare, the essence of which, "as of popular culture, lies in not being defeatable" (19). Ernest Mathijs likewise argues that one aim of the 24fps is "to observe and expose the confrontation between the official culture and the counter-culture, as if it were some kind of guerrilla warfare" (65). As the hegemonic source of frustration in the novel, communitarian power trumps any effort to alter its course from within, hence Frenesi's backfired attempt to change Vond through her body, his objectifying desire for which precludes the intersubjective/loving embrace that she desires in Kansas City.

Being frustrated within the system and not being defeatable on its periphery is nevertheless a tenuous distinction in *Vineland*. Sedition, or violence against institutionalized authority, is no more satisfactory than Frenesi's complicity, of which DL's failure to assassinate Vond is a clear indication. The Vietnam War, to which Pynchon frequently alludes, symbolizes the repression against which Leftist dissidents continue to battle (as analogues of Vietnamese resistance) as much as the war's actual support among liberal intellectuals during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations is a reminder of systemic, not just Republican, injustices in America.[5] Consider, for example, DL's and Frenesi's foil, the sexually and "legally ambiguous tow-truck team of Eusebio ('Vato')

[5] For a discussion, see Chomsky's "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" (1969).

Gomez and Cleveland ('Blood') Bonnifoy," both of whom are embittered Vietnam veterans (44). While militant bipartisanship remains dominant in America, they partially satisfy the desire of fellow veteran, Thanatoid Ortho Bob, for revenge against "half a dozen names" as they escort Vond, the novel's homophobic commander of Reagan's war on drugs, to hell (174). But just as the experience of Vietnam still weighs heavily on Vato and Blood, Vond's demise does not itself secure the end of communitarianism. Shortly before his death, his recruits descend upon Vineland pot-growth operations "as if they had invaded some helpless land far away, instead of a short plane ride from San Francisco" (357). Ortho Bob's unnamed names and Vond's legacy temper the allure of sedition. The power of the state exceeds its representatives; the system itself resists complete victory for those who wish to overthrow it entirely.

Systemic deferral notwithstanding, the novel does not lose all hope for a liberal takeover and its promise of greater freedom. The third reason for which Frenesi's and DL's partnership is significant in this regard is that its failure leads to DL's more hopeful one with Takeshi, a Japanese entrepreneur who literally uses life's blows to his advantage. After they miraculously reunite in California (their first encounter in Japan is brief and anonymous) and through the miracle of the Puncutron Machine undo The Ninja Death Touch, Takeshi and his would-be killer eventually fall in love as they run a karmic adjustment business together. José Liste Noya, whose article I return to below, puts it as follows: "[t]he death-dominated relationship of Frenesi and Brock is replaced in the novel's conclusion by the burgeoning erotic impulse of the unlikely pairing of DL and Takeshi"

(160). The effect of the replacement is twofold. First, it provides the critical means through which to readjust the "falsely deathless parameters" of communitarian simulacra, which is otherwise predominant in the novel. Second, its development is yet another example of consensual, liberal potential.

In his essay, "'Ghostbusters': Fantasy and Postmodern Death in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*" (1998), Noya argues that *Vineland* comes to moral/political terms with "what Jean Baudrillard has apocalyptically described as 'hyperreality' or the postmodern 'era of simulation,' the world of simulated images without original referents" (149). To this world that is "a real bereft of any ontological weight, a real whose 'ghost' is only a media simulation," the novel's fantastic elements restore, through a process of counter-mediation, ontological otherness, "the ontological otherness of death itself" (150). Fantasy and the fantastic disruptively parody "the discourse of the conventionally real which aims to domesticate [otherness and death] within its networks of simulation" (152). The ontological ambiguity of the Thanatoids, who are DL's and Takeshi's clientele, has led many critics to recuperate "these mysterious characters," on whose role as quasi-ghosts "one can only speculate," within the apocalyptic framework that Noya mentions (Wilde 171). Hayles reads them as a living "cult that has accepted their deaths as the only reality worth noticing" (26). Barbara Pittman, who explicitly rebuts Hayles, shares her apocalyptic view: the "allegorical Thanatoids" represent American Leftists who "are so distracted [by media] they do not even know that they are [politically] dead" (47). And Wilde, despite his reluctance to speculate, sees in them "a clue to the nature of the larger American population,

traumatized by television and possibly by memories of the sixties" (171). Implicit in all three analyses is a Baudrillardian distrust of mediation and a concomitant pessimism to which Noya has this to say: "[t]he real is always mediated, in both its representational and more openly political senses, but this implies it can be disruptively mediated in turn, a counter-mediation that may hopefully open its fantastic plurality" (166). Rather than "forget about Baudrillard's account of America as Disneyland" (99), as Rorty advocates in *Achieving Our Country*, Noya shows how its disruptive reciprocal in *Vineland* begs the "question of what pragmatic uses the fantastic is actually put to" (152). One such use, I shall argue, is that Pynchon constructs an alternative to communitarian simulacra. His liberal simulacra are the contemporary versions of what Rorty calls Whitman's and Dewey's "utopian dreams – dreams of an ideally decent and civilized society – in the place of knowledge of God's Will, Moral Law, the Laws of History, or the Facts of Science" (106-107).

The complexity of the novel's simulacral adjustment and the circuitous link between DL's failure with Frenesi and success with Takeshi underscore the ambiguity of its plot, "its abrupt swerves and backtrackings, its embedded stories and endless, erratic flashbacks, its modal mimicry of any and all cultural forms, high and low, from comic strip to parable" (Wilde 175). DL's transition from numinous acts of sedition to consensual interdependence begins, as mentioned, in opposition to Rortyan liberalism, though not unambiguously. Mafia boss Ralph Wayvone hires her to assassinate his "old pinochle partner Brock Vond" (102), a tempting proposal over which she wavers because "acts, deeply moral and

otherwise, had consequences" (132). Her equivocation does not sit well with Wayvone, whose "dear friends" in the drug business want Vond dead because, having "won his war against the lefties, now he sees his future in the war against drugs" (130). But although Wayvone must kidnap and sell DL to the Japanese sex industry, in which Vond indulges while in Japan for a prosecutors' conference, she in no way uses her powers to avoid complicity in murder. In another illustration of activism through the seditious body, Wayvone repurchases her body to expedite its, if not her, sexual and political service: "after a day and a night of jack-hammer sex," they meet "[o]utside the establishment, in the streets" where they walk "nailing down the scenario for Brock's assassination" (140). If one focuses on her equivocal complicity with the mafia, DL's status as a liberal is indeed ambiguous. The narrative, however, does not resist clarity.

In what amounts to a cautionary tale, DL later renounces her past vigilantism to Prairie, whom she meets at the wedding reception of Wayvone's daughter (a subtle allusion to the setting of Coleridge's famous poem). Her subsequent role as maternal surrogate supports Noya's point that DL "comes to invert Frenesi's shying away from responsibility and self-involvement with the real" (159), which is to say "the repressed reality of death" that is especially connate to the parent-child relationship from which Vond's simulacral world is an escape (160). She informs Prairie that equally escapist "fantasies of taking revenge on Brock Vond" had thrown her "off-center," referring to liberal middle-ground from which she had strayed (130). Her previous logic that there is "nothing wrong with killing him" because in "one way or anther he'd taken away

the lives of people [she] loved" had only attracted the unscrupulous Wayvone, complicity with whom, however seditious the intent, had simply reinforced the communitarianism power against which her desire for revenge had arisen (130). As she begins to recount the past to Prairie, for example, DL laments that Vond is not only still alive but is "badassin' around up in Vineland County, actin' like a li'l fuckin' army o' occupation" (103). He remains a "dangerous" actor according to the liberal simulacrum through which she represents him to Prairie. As such, in Vond's actual presence, she does not submit to his otherwise plausible claim that he is her real father. The unmediated status of their relationship is irrelevant because Prairie rejects him as an irksome badass: her "blood type is A," his is "Preparation H" (376). In hopeful contrast to her mother's delusional past and DL's futile sedition, Prairie only entertains "Brock fantasies" *after* he dies, for which reason they "go safely unanswered" (384-385). The liberal kinship system, itself simulacral, thus prevails over the ever-threatening snitch system at the end of the novel.

Although it is clear that DL's lapse into sedition functions as a warning for Prairie, to view Pynchon's defense of liberalism as simulacral requires further exposition. To say, as Rorty does, that reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it is not to say that political theory (whether descriptive or prescriptive) has no effect upon the real world. It is to say among other things that our descriptions, as mediations, need not be deleterious; they need not circulate within a politically irresponsible hyperreality. If not in theory, the liberal simulacra in the novel differ from their communitarian reciprocals in practice. Specifically, they restore,

through a form of simulation, the imaginary coextensivity between political theory and political reality, between the analogous map and territory with which Baudrillard begins his discussion of simulacra. Insofar as language mediates communication and the senses mediate perception, an objective understanding of others is impossible. The common language and common sense by which humans come to a consensus are fundamentally simulative; they are but images, what Bertrand Russell calls "sense-data" which circulate with no essential reference to an unmediated reality that separate consciousnesses may experience mutually.[6] The liberal vision to which *Vineland* contributes is attentive to a political reality that it anticipates but cannot fully know, "the real in all its contingency and complexity" (Noya 160). Liberalism is moreover a form of Spivak's "strategic essentialism" that Stephen N. doCarmo defends as "a countercultural political tool" that "allows us to invoke, albeit highly self-consciously, the sorts of essentialist notions that are helpful, even necessary, in combating opposing and oppressive essentializations" (178). Communitarianism, which exemplifies the latter essentializations, constitutes a lethal escape from contingency, consensus, and conciliation, however much these are themselves simulative. Although "all discourses are ultimately ungrounded, or simulated," the development of DL and Takeshi's relationship dramatizes, in liberal terms, the ethical difference between communitarianism and liberalism (186).

To begin with, DL's deviation from liberal principles in Japan stems from a lack of attentiveness toward the individual rights of others. Not only does her

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[6] For Russell's discussion on sense-data, see chapter one of *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), "Appearance and Reality."

self-absorbing hatred for Vond inhibit her attempt to kill him, but she harms an innocent human in the process. Upon return to California where she finds solace at the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives retreat, Head-mistress Rochelle instructs a guilt-ridden DL to recover her concentration. "We've always believed in your sincerity," she tells her, "but it can't get you much further – when do we ever see you concentrate, where's the attention span?" (155). Rochelle grants her only "a few days to prepare" a plan to locate and save Takeshi, after which a penitent DL "had got to where she could stay away from other people's smokes, keep her hands off her pussy, and hypnotize herself to sleep when who should appear at the gate but Takeshi, looking for *her*, saving everyone the trouble" (original emphasis 155-156). As the reference to *voluntary* and regenerative hypnosis suggests, one must concentrate, or be self-conscious, in order to counter simulacral, and specifically communitarian, hypnosis. A lack of concentration results in politically lethal fantasies like the collective and politically degenerative sleep into which McLuhan's somnambulistic viewers fall and from which DL must awake. In doing so, she exchanges (politically) masturbatory individualism and its inattentiveness to others for an intersubjective, consensual, attentive, and eventually sexual relationship with Takeshi. In effect, she internalizes the liberal simulacra that her character comes to represent.

This liberal vision, to which Prairie also contributes, manifests in both inanimate and animate media through which (and whom) she recreates her past. In the latter instance, she, Takeshi, and DL become a simulated family. As they flee from Vond, she imagines that they are "some family in a family car, with no

problems that couldn't be solved in half and hour of wisecracks and commercials, on their way to a fun weekend on some beach" (191). Her benign adolescent escapism aside, Takeshi and DL equip Prairie with technological as well as ideological tools to confront her mother and counter Vond's seduction in the last chapter. For most of the novel, all that she has are the old 24fps films from which she learns about the sexual and political complicity between Frenesi and Vond. She must doubly concentrate as she views them because Vond, whose confiscation of her and Zoyd's house induces her quest for her true identity, is always around the corner, eager to undermine her progress. Although simulation itself problematizes the truth for which she yearns, Prairie validates doCarmo's point that "essentialist political discourses as those of liberal versus conservative . . . are often all we have in our struggle against the oppression that follows us even into an era as hyperreal as our own" (191). Not only does she demonstrate "the possibility of political consciousness in a culture that seems wholly uninterested in any political reality," her simulacral roadmap does not erode that reality (191). In contrast to Rex, who inadvertently murders the novel's would-be messiah, Prairie does not hurt others as she goes about achieving her political object. As Hume puts it, "Pynchon's quester is a girl searching for her mother and the meaning of her family history, nicely reversing the gender of the archetypal quester Oedipus" (439). She might have added that through Prairie, Pynchon nicely reverses the murderous trajectory of communitarian simulacra.

As the title of this chapter implies, the ability to pursue desire through liberal simulacra does not therefore secure utopian freedom in *Vineland*. A future

utopia forever remains a *potential* that is contingent upon the often tumultuous and quite dystopian exchange between individuals. Freedom from bodily and political frustration is not dependent on the absolute and reciprocal satisfaction of desire but on the ability of liberals to fend off those who appropriate utopian desire as an absolute praxis of power. Far from utopian, the political achievement of the novel is that it demonstrates how liberalism, through Leftist consensus, is a viable alternative to communitarian hegemony in contemporary American society. History itself defers the ahistorical utopias to which all simulacra point but cannot reach. Liberal simulacra, as Pynchon dramatizes through the consensual relationships of Zoyd, Sasha, Takeshi, DL, and Prairie, pragmatically account for, rather than predetermine, the reality of the Other. In these terms, the novel depicts political harmony as achievable.

Chapter III: The Paradoxicality of Desire: Reason and Chaos in *The Elementary Particles*

Like *Vineland*, Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* explores desire through the motif of body and body-politic. Most emphatically, however, the novel decries liberalism in post-1968 French society as a politico-economic correlative of an unsatisfiable human body. Sexual and capitalistic consumption reciprocally manifest a common *raison d'être*: the free pursuit of desire, the *modus operandi* of late twentieth-century "sex-and-advertising society" (133). In further contrast to *Vineland*, frustration is immanent within, and precedent to, the liberal economy of desire; it is not the effect of communitarian control. Houellebecq's two main characters are intrinsically unhappy. A preeminent biophysicist, Michel Djerzinski regards human behaviour as predetermined within otherwise arbitrary and mutable systems. The seemingly inevitable yet random misery of existence underlies his apathy for life. Equally miserable, the sexually compulsive life of his half-brother, Bruno Clément, corroborates Michel's conviction "that, in itself, desire – unlike pleasure – is a source of suffering, pain, and hatred" (133). The absence of desire, as Michel embodies and his scientific work entails, is nevertheless debilitative, and eventually lethal, to individuals and society alike. The novel thus articulates the conundrum of modern democracies: desire threatens the very social and economic perpetuation for which it is necessary.

Ruth Cruickshank, among many others, surmises that Michel and Bruno are "the helpless victims of the consequences of sexual liberation and (post)

soixante-huitard ideology" (105). Their mother abandons them during the late 1950s to pursue what Eamon Maher dubs a "life of sexual permissiveness" (365). In this sense individualistic, her paradoxical quest for sexual communion divides her family just as individual consumption remains an operative yet divisive goal in 1990s France where "desire is marshaled and blown up out of all proportion" (133). In light of this paradox, Michel, in a discussion with Bruno, refutes the traditionally communitarian and "utopian solution – from Plato to Huxley by way of Fourier – [which does] away with desire and the suffering it causes by satisfying it immediately" (133). Even when obtainable, satisfaction merely exasperates the crisis of modern democracy as he defines it: "[f]or society to function, for competition to continue, people have to want more and more, until desire fills their lives and finally devours them" (134). As Maher observes, "the 'sexual revolution' is usually portrayed as a communist utopia" but for Houellebecq "it was simply another stage in the rise of the individual" (364). And yet, does not individuation tend toward communal harmony insofar as consummated desire implies intersubjectivity with the external world? The Houellebecqian response is negative: the only reciprocity between individual and collective desire lies in their mutually intrinsic insatiability. In *The Elementary Particles*, the body is the source of human division, of which the body-politic, in its failure to satisfy individual desire collectively, is the reflection.

In what sense is the body the source of division? Its desires encourage reproduction, economic activity, and other interpersonal phenomena but, Houellebecq emphasizes, they are no consolation to individuals who deteriorate

with age and frustration under the promise of consummation. Throughout the novel, various claims to fulfill this promise dissipate at the moment of materialization. Temporality renders any consummation transient and so does the desire for greater satisfaction, ad infinitum. Although they share a period of sexual ecstasy, Bruno distances himself from Christiane, his most intimate lover, when her lapse into paraplegia threatens his investment in sexual desire. His response expedites her suicide and validates Michel's point that "the knowledge of physical mortality" means that "cruelty and egotism cannot fail to spread," even under so-called utopian conditions (134). Bruno invalidates his own theory of "sexual 'social democracy'" (179) according to which "sex is based on the notion of *goodwill*" (original emphasis 181). Just as absolute consensus is an unobtainable telos in liberal democracies, whence stems a gradation of frustrations from political compromise to exclusion, those who accept "the superiority of youth over age" and invest in "the cult of the body" suffer the irony of all utopias: the failure to retain, with often devastating consequences, the ideal world that they announce (89).

Is liberal democracy utopian in this ironic sense? This is the most obvious political question that underlies *The Elementary Particles* in which the freedom to pursue desire sets body and body-politic on a path toward common annihilation. Houellebecq's apocalyptic epilogue for the moment aside, the answer would appear to be 'no' insofar as liberalism comprises both the cultural and reformist Left in whose unity Rorty sees hope for achieving the (American) dream of political harmony. In terms of his Whitmanian-Deweyan paradigm quoted earlier,

a liberal democracy does not announce this dream but, through contingent consensus, approaches "shared utopian dreams – dreams of an ideally decent and civilized society – in the place of knowledge of God's Will, Moral Law, the Laws of History, or the Facts of Science" (*Achieving* 106-107). The rejection of "liberal values" in *The Elementary Particles* as the failed attempt "to create an authentic utopia – a place where the principles of self-government, respect for individual freedom and true democracy could be practiced in the 'here and now'" thus constitutes a clash of philosophical vocabularies, for which contextualization is necessary (81).

With regard to the pragmatic optimism that is evident in *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty subscribes to what contemporary political philosophers call the "anti-foundationalist" position. According to Gilles Labelle,

> [p]roponents of this view believe that democracy need not be 'founded' in order to ensure its continued existence. In other words, democracy does not need to rest on metaphysical principles which are inevitably expressed in 'great narratives' and which they believe have become anachronistic in this disenchanted era. Democracy has reached a point where it no longer needs to evoke Natural Right, an idea of the Self or of Man, in order to be legitimate. It can therefore do without "the traditional attempt to dig down the 'philosophical foundation of democracy.' (77)[7]

As mentioned earlier, Labelle contrasts this position with the belief "that democracy cannot rest merely on the pragmatic fact of its existence in order to

[7]Labelle cites Rorty's "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" (1988) in this passage.

ensure its survival" (77). More specifically, "foundational narratives do not necessarily have to draw on an arsenal of metaphysical principles . . . in order to be set out, the challenge of modernity being precisely the elaboration of non-metaphysical narratives that can be shared by all and used to found a stable political order" (77). To this end, he deems the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis exemplary. I return to Castoriadis' political philosophy in my next chapter. For the moment, Labelle's summary of a central theme therein is sufficient: Castoriadis favours the notion of "Being defined as 'Chaos'" over that of Platonic Reason on which he argues modern democracies operate and in which "Being thus appears as a 'determinacy'" (78). In this sense, the utopian visions to which Rorty refers presuppose a metaphysics that they are meant to replace. Ontological determinacy threatens liberal contingency with ironic failure.

Such failure pervades *The Elementary Particles* wherein liberalism exemplifies the illusory promise of consummation, the inability of anthropocentric Reason to subordinate Chaos. "The world outside had its own rules," the meta-human narrator recalls, "and those rules were not human" (229). Interestingly, Houellebecq first articulates this worldview with reference to American literature, not contemporary French philosophy. In *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (1991), he concludes the following from the short stories of Lovecraft:

> Few beings have ever been so impregnated, pierced to the core, by the conviction of the absolute futility of human aspiration. *The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary*

> *particles. A figure in transition toward chaos*. That is what will finally prevail. The human race will disappear. Other races in turn will appear and disappear. The skies will be glacial and empty, traversed by the feeble light of half-dead stars. These too will disappear. Everything will disappear. And human actions are as free and as stripped of meaning as the unfettered movement of the elementary particles. Good, evil, morality, sentiments? Pure "Victorian fictions." All that exists is egotism. Cold, intact, and radiant. (my emphasis 32)

In adopting what Gavin Bowd calls "the Lovecraftian view of a world devoid of freedom, altruism or heroism," Houellebecq rejects liberalism at its foundation (29). Where liberals view democracy as a becoming, as *achieving* an ideal, his novels reflect the pre-Socratic position that "there is nothing to hope for since everything that lasts merely represents a temporary victory over death which will not fail to rear its head once again thereby calling upon humans to forever rise up against it" (Labelle 82). Around this notion of Chaos, whose reemergence in contemporary French discourse Labelle attributes to Castoriadis, *The Elementary Particles* above all dramatizes "the impossibility of desire," Jack I. Abecassis' ascription for Houellebecq's "generalized cultural project" (802).

Just as refoundation projects, according to Labelle, are efforts to rethink and thereby reform modern democracy, Houellebecqian Chaos does not imply resignation to the desire/frustration binarism that utopian resolutions reinforce. Bruno experiences such reinforcement throughout his life and yet he variously

pursues desire with existential defiance, "acutely aware of the fallout of sexual liberation" (Bowd 33). His persistent but consistently frustrated attempts to satisfy utopian desire indirectly enact Michael Karwowski's definition of the existentialist's vocation: "to accept life as an 'experiment' whose purpose is to see if some order can be extracted from the chaos of experience" (42). More revolutionarily, Michel's only sense of purpose lies directly in his "scientific research, with the aim of creating a new ontology and a new civilization on the ruins of the West" (Bowd 34). Where Bruno experiments with various utopian schemes, all of which ultimately end in chaos, Michel postulates that utopian satisfaction is itself an impossible order around which to structure human life. Houellebecq's narrative strategy accordingly comprises two contrapuntal patterns: problem-exasperation and problem-solution. In the three main sections of the novel, desire is the operating principle of human society and its greatest threat; moreover, it is a paradoxical problem that exasperates itself. In the epilogue, Houellebecq explores the possibility of a radical solution, namely the end of utopian desire through genetic transformation.

It goes without saying that the transition from problem to response, if read as a literal solution, is suspect, if not wholly contradictory, in light of Houellebecq's first narrative strategy. Not only does the futuristic narrator of *The Elementary Particles* herald "*a new world order*" in which meta-humans, free from "*the darkness*" (5) of desire, "*live in perpetual afternoon*" (6), but the means to this vague utopia is explicitly holocaustic. The proposal that "[e]very animal species, however highly evolved, could be transformed into a similar species

reproduced by cloning, and immortal," entails, ipso facto, the death of humanity (258). As Kim Doré observes, the "mauvaise presse" to which *The Elementary Particles* is therefore subject is not surprising: "[o]n ne proclame pas ainsi la fin de l'homme, une fin biogénétique de surcroît, sans être accusé d'eugénisme, de fascisme, d'*utopisme*" (original emphasis 67). But if one reads the novel's apocalyptic frame as "une stratégie narrative" rather than a literal proposal, "c'est au rapport contemporain de l'individu au temps et à l'histoire que nous renvoient les postulats de la science dans *Les particules élémentaires*" (68). Along the same lines, Cruickshank observes that "[m]ost critics noted those aspects of the work judged to be politically incorrect, but did not go on to interrogate their function in the narrative and the ideological challenge they might imply" (108). She argues that "the critical reception of the text reveals a failure of the establishment to meet a challenge to its legitimacy," considering of central importance in her article "the role of the dominant order (and the discourse of the literary institution and the media in particular) in the trials surrounding the novel" (106). In other words, the controversy over the novel's literal proposal and its concomitant anti-humanism sublimates an underlying challenge to contemporary hegemony.

What is the nature of this challenge? While lauding the way in which Houellebecq's "text challenges the status quo by bringing pressing issues to the fore," Cruickshank focuses on the text's public trial rather than its "ideological crime," the challenge itself (115). In doing so, she evades the implications of its political incorrectness on another level, disclaiming that her "reading does not seek to condone the troubling discourses of homophobia, misogyny, racism or

ageism (to mention but a few) featured in the novel, nor to promote its 'final solution,' nor to assess whether the author himself subscribes to the inevitability of that conclusion" (115). These discourses and the novel's response are indeed troubling for the very reason that they are neither condonable nor even – and herein lies the true scandal – arguments to condone. They are symptoms of desire that implicate modern democracy in the cruelties for which liberals and conservatives alike condemn the novel. More than a distasteful abstraction of science-fiction, the collective suicide that ends human misery is a horror in which modern democracy and the human body already take part. Desire itself is self-destructive and politically lethal. Its representation as such by Houellebecq means that "l'*Affaire Houellebecq* has little to do with literary value per se; it concerns, rather, the desecration of the regime of desire, our last idol" (Abecassis 801). Paradoxically, the regime of desire appears necessary for individual life and the inter-personal relationships from which it stems and continues. "In compensation" for the spread of cruelty and egotism that attend the consciousness of mortality, "the same is true of love," Michel "bizarrely" tells Bruno (134). The bizarreness of desire is a paradox, an affront to Reason, a manifestation of Chaos. In terms of its politics, the challenge of *The Elementary Particles* is therefore twofold: to acknowledge this paradox and to contemplate a polity that will take insatiability into account.

Throughout Houellebecq's oeuvre, the image of a cage, at once a symbol of oppression and comfort, recurs in conjunction with the theme of suicide. Consider the analogy by which the protagonist of *Whatever* contemplates the

"paradoxical usefulness" of suicide (124). He begins by evoking the feeling of oppression that attends bodily desire when an outside order restricts it:

> Let's put a chimpanzee in a tiny cage fronted by concrete bars. The animal would go berserk, throw itself against the walls, rip out its hair, inflict cruel bites on itself, and in 73% of cases will actually end up killing itself. Let's now make a breach in one of the walls, which we will place right next to a bottomless precipice. Our friendly sample quadrumane will approach the edge, he'll look down, remain at the edge for ages, return there time and time again, but generally he won't teeter over the brink; and in all events his nervous state will be radically assuaged. (124)

In keeping with Houellebecq's overall object of political criticism as defined by Varsava in "Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism," the cage alludes to liberal democracy. Individuals may pursue private desire therein so long as it does not contravene liberalism itself, partisan arguments for which belie an implosive potential, "the way that bars of graphite reinforce the structure of a nuclear reactor" (125). The exchange between public and private desire is implosive for Houellebecq because subjective experience denies the intersubjective experience of absolute consensus and consumption. Ontological and physical limits undermine these comforting promises, the allure and operative function of which are such that democratic societies naturalize them, which exasperates the pain of its temporal impossibility. "Of all social and economic

systems," reasons the anthropomorphic chimpanzee, "capitalism is unquestionably the most natural. This already suffices to show that it is bound to be the worst" (124-125). Cruel Nature dispels the telos of becoming as a cage by which Reason bounds desire and in which Nietzschean comfort alone prevails. According to Nietzsche in section 157 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, the "thought of suicide is a powerful comfort; it helps one through many a dreadful night." As the above anecdote likewise suggests, suicide provides paradoxical comfort from *teleological* desire, the promised comfort of which is oppressive in its functional unattainability (if absolute consumption did occur, the economy of desire would collapse). In a concept to which Houellebecq returns in his second and more controversial novel, the suicidal imagination amounts to a life-saving breach in Reason.

Along with its *mauvaise presse*, much of the critical response to the novel focuses on the controversial theme of suicide rather than its philosophical basis. In doing so, even approbatory interpretations reflect the faith in Reason that the novel challenges. For example, the end of humanity that Houellebecq envisions both reinvigorates humanist apologetics and exposes its teleological presuppositions (against which he opposes the comfort of suicide). In "An Outsider's View of Modern Ireland: Michel Houellebecq's *Atomised*" (2003), Maher laments that "sociological developments in France tend to manifest themselves in Ireland years later" (27). With this in mind, he exalts the novel as a warning against liberalism but presupposes the teleological foundation on which liberalism operates:

> While clearly not impressed with France, which he depicts in *Atomised* as being doomed, [Houellebecq] senses that modern Ireland is going down the same slippery slope with its high-tech culture and (newly found) liberal lifestyle. We need to wake up to the dangers of spiritual and moral atrophy and heed the haunting message of *Atomised*. Otherwise, we could face the possibility of a future where humanity would disappear to give way to "to a new species which was asexual and immortal, a species which had outgrown individuality, individuation, and progress" (p. 371). This is not a comforting thought! (32)

By implication comforting, the notions of individuality, individuation, and progress ironically inform the liberal lifestyle and high-tech culture that compose Ireland's "slippery slope." Discussed in detail below, *The Elementary Particles* problematizes these notions whose teleological paradoxicality Maher demonstrates as he defends human progress and associates its pursuit with our potential destruction.

The irony in Maher's approach marks a tension between individual and collective desire that is more haunting than a future holocaust, the conception of which implies its possible prevention. A greater discomfort stems from the seeming paradox that nature contains within itself the means to its own destruction. To use a linguistic analogy, individualism is to collectivism as subject is to predicate, namely codependent but irreconcilably disparate. Attempts under Reason to bridge the divide ultimately perpetuate divisive

misconstruction. At the Lieu du Changement, Bruno embodies such division as he masturbates repeatedly to compensate for repeated sexual rejection. Although his pursuit of happiness is "a black farce" (Bowd 32), his farcical ineptitude with women does reflect an inability to "create synergies" that the "intended . . . haven of humanist and democratic feeling" inadvertently confirms (*Elementary Particules* 81-82). The camp's promise of synergy exasperates the frustration of its clienteles who faithfully invest in "individual freedom and true democracy" (81). After Bruno fails to seduce a young Catholic, the narrator describes the nature of language from which faith in individual-collective reciprocity, like any teleological belief, is a quasi-religious evasion: "Space separates one skin from another. Words cross the space, the space between one skin and another. Unheard, unanswered, the words hang in the air and begin to decay, to stink; that's the way it is. Seen like this, words could separate too" (94). Such is Bruno's "*world of division,/ The way of thinking which divided us*" in comparison to which the narrator's world is a *"halo of joy*" (6). For now, the contrast serves to illustrate a lack of reciprocity between the body and the liberal body-politic. More generally, spatial and linguistic separation destroy any hope for the intersubjective unity toward which Reason orients itself. In short, the pursuit of teleological happiness is self-destructive in a manner that Houellebecq depicts as suicidal and collectively holocaustic.

In *Blindness and Insight* (1983), Paul de Man perceives in human division "the imaginary source of fiction," by which he means that "the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from filling the

void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, *our* nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability" (19). "*Nothingness turns to nothing*" (233) is the Heideggerian epigraph of DANIEL1,20 in *The Possibility of an Island*, a chapter in which the human prototype for successive Daniel-clones asserts: "love, like pity, according to Nietzsche, had never been anything but *a fiction invented* by the weak to make the strong feel guilty, to introduce limits to their natural freedom and ferocity" (my emphasis 241). In this novel, Houellebecq elaborates on the technical solution to nothingness (ontological vacuity) that he introduces in the epilogue of *The Elementary Particles*. At this point, it suffices to note that the postmodern notion of invented fiction pervades his oeuvre both meta-fictionally and thematically. In the first instance, meta-fictionality invites one to read the grandiosity of his narrators as a parody of Reason. In the second instance, he uses such parody as a form of strategic essentialism. The narrator of *The Elementary Particles* restates, thematically in terms of Chaos, the subject-object void that Reason cannot reconcile in terms of love, liberalism, and other teleological objects of Houellebecqian parody. It is in this twofold sense that the story of Michel and Bruno is "a fiction – a plausible re-creation based on partial recollections, rather than a definite, attestable truth" (257). As such, we need not despair that Bruno's synecdochical desire for fulfillment exasperates his frustration. Parodic representation, at least thematically, does not amount to postmodern pessimism for Houellebecq. If fulfillment is fictional, it is by definition replaceable within an alternate, more pragmatic, narrative. With regard the aforementioned cage analogy, it is possible

to breach the vocabulary of Reason, to redefine the reciprocity between body and body-politic as an invention in transition toward Chaos, not as an essential means for permanent, utopian, unity.

From the start of the novel, Houellebecq connotes a breach in Reason through the character of Michel. His pet canary, for example, is another objective correlative for the paradoxical comfort that suicide procures the *reason*able mind. Within its cage, the bird cannot attain happiness; it "never seemed happy" (10). And yet, despite Michel's encouragement, it clings to the familiar for security from the natural, the supposed domain of happiness insofar as consummation *naturally* follows the freedom to desire under Reason, the expression of Being. Through the image of this bird which has internalized an unnatural habitat, Houellebecq questions the very possibility of such happiness:

> Could a canary be happy? Happiness is an intense, all-consuming feeling of joyous fulfillment akin to inebriation, rapture or ecstasy. The first time he took the canary out of its cage, the frightened creature shit on the sofa before flying back to the bars, desperate to find a way back in. He tried again a month later. This time the poor bird fell from an open window. Barely remembering to flutter its wings, it landed on a balcony five floors below on the building opposite. (10-11)

Happiness, it seems, is not possible in nature (outside the cage that exasperates its impossibility). This suggestion begs a twofold question that is central to the novel. Is the *desire* for teleological happiness natural, and frustration inevitable,

or is it socially naturalized and therefore revisable within the parameters of non-teleological reason?

In contrast to Bruno's paradoxically sad pursuit of happiness, Michel resigns teleological desire altogether. In so doing, his character parallels Bruno's narrative of frustration with one of productive activity. The structural work on DNA that gives his life meaning is a trope through which the novel redefines the body/body-politic relationship as one of working autonomously against Chaos rather than heteronomously toward utopian fulfillment. His bleak farewell party in chapter one underscores the break with society that this self-reflective worldview entails. He has resigned his job as department head in order to "[t]hink," the literal and figurative implications of which are evident as he drives home to find his canary dead at the bottom of its cage (14). He feels "like a character in a science fiction film he'd seen at the university: the last man on earth after every other living thing had been wiped out. Something in the air evoked a dry apocalypse" (10). Although his mood and the canary's death foreshadow the novel's apocalyptic ending, their association with science fiction is a reminder that the ensuing metaphysical revolution is both realistic and fictional. The uncertain distinction between reality and the imagination undermines absolute notions of both, for which reason freedom from teleological desire is possible, but the attendant lack of philosophical certainty is frightening. The death of his canary that in life had clung to its cage induces a nightmare from which Michel wakes "trembling," so ending "his first night of freedom" (11). In this manner, Houellebecq puts forth the thesis that neither teleological desire nor the body-

politic that it operates on is essentially natural; however, refoundation flirts with death and collective uncertainty.

Michel, we soon discover, has not always perceived the breach in Reason that compels him to employ science pragmatically. At age forty, his "midlife crisis" (16) is an epistemological one whose irresolvability becomes evident when "youthful optimism fades, and happiness and confidence evaporate" (18). A photo from his childhood makes him cry as he recalls the philosophical telos in which he had believed:

> The child in the photograph sat at his desk holding a textbook open in front of him. The boy smiled straight at the camera, happily, confidently; it seemed unthinkable to Michel that he was that boy. The child did his homework, worked hard in class with an assured seriousness. He was just beginning to discover the world, and what he saw did not frighten him; he was ready to take his place in society. (17)

Thirty odd years later and "struggling to come to terms with the transience of life," Michel wonders, "Where was truth?" (18). As a property of human language, not a discernible object of science, truth belies the anthropocentric notion that the world is orderly. The notion had assured him as a child, but an adult Michel realizes that he is a transient being whose telos is death, not reconciliation with the external world. "As an adult," Cruickshank writes, "this eminent scientist's personal life is void" (105). Face to face with *the* void, he realizes that he is a figure in transition toward Chaos.

Michel's consciousness of his transience is tantamount to a breach in Reason that assuages the oppression of non-consummative desire. Unlike the "man in a midlife crisis [who] is asking only to live, to live a little more, a little longer," he is no longer bound by the promise of consummation. He "had had enough; he could see no *reason* to go on" (my emphasis 17). The thought of suicide, of the "incontrovertible link between sex and death," removes the burden of desire's impossibility (136). The thought, furthermore, is paradoxically useful. It enables him to look past the illusion of essential body/body-politic reciprocity, of sexual intersubjectivity. In molecular biological terms, he understands that it is "necessary to look past the framework of sexual reproduction to study the general topological conditions of cell division" (136). From the molecular to the politico-economic level, division defines human nature in *The Elementary Particles*. Consequently without desire, not even for Annabelle, his childhood sweetheart, an adolescent Michel feels "strangely calm," even as she turns to the sadistic David de Meola to sublimate her unrequited love (72). For most of his life, Michel is "separated from the world by a vacuum molded to his body like a shell, a protective armor" (72). His response to ontological vacuity does not represent an attempt to impose rational order on irrationality but to address the self-destructiveness that attends such an imposition – eventual intercourse with Annabelle, as the sexual manifestation of Reason, will feel "like a little suicide" (226). Rather than propose a suitable body-politic in which to satisfy desire absolutely, Houellebecq in effect shifts the focus to the problem that frustrates

such propositions, that of the body's transitional, transient, and non-transcendent subjectivity.

Chapter IV: The End of Reason: Destruction and Refoundation *à la* Houellebecq

The epilogue of *The Elementary Particles* begins with an interesting admission and a startling assertion. The preceding story of Michel and Bruno is "a fiction" but "[w]hat follows, however, belongs to History," namely the narrator's "brief résumé" of "the events which followed the publication of Djerzinski's work" (257). The admission is interesting because, if we are to take his narrator literally, the means by which Houellebecq conveys the supremacy of Chaos over Reason in the main body of the novel is itself "a plausible re-creation based on partial recollections, rather than a definite, attestable truth" (257). The very category of fiction does not transcend the lexicon of Reason in which it is defined, the novel's theme of Chaos and the non-reciprocity between body and body-politic notwithstanding. And yet, startlingly, from this fictional theme arises Truth, the post-Djerzinski assertion "that the solution to every problem – whether psychological, sociological or more broadly human – could only be a technical solution" (264). In this epistemological mélange, Houellebecq invites us to regard the politics of Reason as the expeditor of humanity's annihilation, after which he proposes annihilation via Reason incarnate, the scientific transformation of *homo sapiens* "into a similar species reproduced by cloning, and immortal" (258). Is this a literal proposal or another plausible re-recreation? Read literally, this substitution of one metaphysics of Reason for another is both absurd and impractical – what good, beyond Nietzschean comfort in the possibility of suicide, is a technical solution to human misery if it entails the end of humankind? As such, I read the epilogue as an extended metaphor of the

novel's theme of "the impossibility of desire," in other words, the impossibility of utopian satisfaction (Abecassis 802). Within this context, furthermore, I seek to show that Houellebecq's literal proposal more than defies Reason; it implies, if not demonstrates, the necessity of a re-founded political vocabulary.

In "La fin de l'histoire (naturelle): *Les particules élémentaires* de Michel Houellebecq" (2003), Laurence Dahan-Gaida observes that "l'utopie est avant tout un miroir des aspirations et des fantasmes du présent: le futur qu'elle dessine n'est rien que notre présent saisi dans ses apories et ses points critiques" (107). This observation at once deflates and renders serious the literality of the novel's apocalyptic conclusion. If, on the one hand, the narrator's utopia is nothing more than a misanthropic phantasm, one may take comfort that its holocaustic prerequisite will not materialize upon reflection. On the other hand, the image of a holocaust reflects the paradoxicality of desire (its contiguity with frustration) and the destructive corollary of contemporary promises, let alone claims, of absolute consummation. In this sense, the phantasm conjures up Nietzsche's historically minded, and therefore unhappy, man in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), the self-reflective thought of whom "returns like a *specter* to trouble the quiet of a later moment" (my emphasis 5). Just as an unsatisfying past haunts the present, the repetition of this chain undermines the hope for future transcendence from desire. Those who perceive this chain occupy the "super-historical standpoint" of which Nietzsche writes and thereby see "no salvation in evolution" because "the world is complete and fulfills its aim in every single moment" (10). As a metaphor for the unhappiness that attends this standpoint, the utopian

optimism of Houellebecq's meta-human narrator amounts to inverted pessimism. The possibility of happiness seemingly requires a disruption in history, an evolution that is "méta-naturelle" and, ipso facto, lethal to human life (Dahan-Gaida 93).

In a 1999 interview with Nicolas Bourriaud, Jean-Yves Jouannais, and Jacques-François Marchandise, Houellebecq emphasizes that he is "taking up a position in a debate between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche" (246). He explains his quasi-Schopenhaurian stance in *The Elementary Particles* as "condemning desire precisely because it is a destructive experience" (247). Implicitly, he shares the desire to sustain life that Nietzsche develops in his aforementioned essay (to which I return). To contextualize the apparent irony by which this desire to circumvent desire takes destructive experience to a new level in the epilogue, an account of Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's positions, as Houellebecq dramatizes them in *The Elementary Particles*, is necessary. The point is not to adduce elements in these philosophers' theories that may challenge Houellebecq's reading of them; it is to contextualize the debate that he perceives with reference to their philosophy, as it is his reading that is relevant to the novel. The tension between resignation and desire moreover precipitates Chaos, the novel's thematic opposition to Reason.

In his chapter on Schopenhauer in *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), Bertrand Russell traces the notion of destructive desire from Plato's opposition, between eternal Reality and finite appearance, to the Kantian belief that subjective "volitions must belong to the real world, not to the world of phenomena" (724).

"For the purely knowing subject," writes Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), his or her "body is a representation like any other, an object among objects" (99). Thus, the body is the object through which desire manifests itself; "according to Schopenhauer, the body is the appearance of which will is the reality" (Russell 724). Far from a source of eternal goodness, however, Schopenhauer views will, or desire, as a kind of cosmic wickedness. In the aforementioned work, he argues that "all suffering is simply nothing but unfulfilled and thwarted willing, and even the pain of the body, when this is injured or destroyed, is as such possible only by the fact that the body is nothing but the will itself become object" (363). Russell's interpretation of this position could easily stand in for Houellebecq's thesis in *Les particules élémentaires*: "[t]here is no such thing as happiness, for an unfulfilled wish causes pain, and attainment brings only satiety" (724). Such absolutism (founded as Schopenhaurian thought is on Platonic Reason) corresponds to Nietzsche's super-historical standpoint, a view that he goes on to attack for its own destructiveness. Implicit in my previous discussion of Michel, this aspect of Schopenhauer's philosophy provides an initial basis from which to understand the resignation and apocalyptic implications of his character.

In the abovementioned essay, Nietzsche privileges will over historical knowledge that impedes an active life. "In other words," he writes, "we need [history] for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action . . . . We would serve history only so far as it serves life; but to value its study beyond a certain point mutilates and degrades life" (3). His alternative is to "leave the

super-historical men to their loathings and their wisdom: we wish rather today to be joyful in our unwisdom and have a pleasant life as active men who go forward and respect the course of the world" (11). The ontology in which these attributes flourish is analogous to that of "the beast that forgets at once and sees every moment really die, sink into the night and mist, extinguished forever" (5). Moreover, the "beast lives *unhistorically*; for it 'goes into' the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder" (original emphasis 5). "History," Nietzsche argues, "so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power, and thus will never become a pure science like mathematics" (12). Pleasure (from which he does not distinguish happiness), activity, and respect for natural evolution stem from this ontology in which one willingly forgets the ultimate futility of human action. Incapacitated in comparison, "the man without any power to forget . . . is condemned to see 'becoming' everywhere" (6). Where Schopenhauer responds to the pain of becoming with mitigatory resignation, Nietzsche prefers to forget "the knowledge that 'being' is merely a continual 'has been,' a thing that lives by denying and contradicting itself" (6). Bruno, to whose character I devote the first part of this chapter, initially embodies Nietzsche's response to the loathings of super-historical men like Schopenhauer.

To be clear, it is important to note that Houellebecq manifestly rejects unhistorical ontology in *Les particules élémentaires* and elsewhere as a means to personal and political happiness. In "The joy of supermarkets," he goes so far as to repine that "[i]nstead of behaving like the honest disciple he was and completing the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche took a stance that led him to an

out-and-out absurdity." He associates the decline of Western civilization in the novel with "Nietzsche's thought" that "has won out now" in the West's "low-quality Nietzschean world" (Bourriaud et al. 247-248). Nevertheless, the line between Nietzsche's seemingly delusory optimism and Schopenhauer's self-reflective pessimism is ambiguous in the novel. Both standpoints presuppose a telos whose impossibility, whether one forgets it or reflects on it, is destructively unobtainable. This ambiguity is evident as Bruno expresses his feeling of isolation to Christiane, who therefore accuses him of pessimism. Although he admits that he and most people do not contribute to society (on whose teleological promises they are dependent), he feels compelled to correct her. His worldview is not "very pessimistic" but "Nietzschean" and "second-rate Nietzsche at that" (177). Like Schopenhauer, he reflects upon the source of his frustration, but, in accordance with Nietzsche, he chooses to forget in an optimistic attempt to satisfy desire. Thus, to regard him and Michel as the respective synecdoches for optimism and pessimism is not only reductive, but it overlooks the common foundation of these positions in Reason.

Given the above ambiguity, it goes without saying that the holocaustic end of desire in the epilogue is not an apologetics for Schopenhaurian philosophy. "L'épilogue," Dahan-Gaida argues, "en effet, nous révèle que l'avènement de la nouvelle humanité a été preparé par l'idéologie *New Age*, laquelle fait pourtant l'objet d'une caricature féroce dans les chapitres sur « Le lieu du changement »" (106). Michel's work literally extends the problem that Bruno embodies, for which reason its product is an "aporie" (107). The narrator's *nouvelle humanité* is

the telos of New Age, quasi-Nietzschean desire. The fact that this end constitutes the end of humanity is an irony that Michel's (probable) suicide prefigures and Schopenhaurian thought implies. "So long as the sage exists," Russell points out, "he exists because he retains his will, which is evil" (726). Suicide becomes the rational solution to desire, the manifestation of which is the body: "the suggestion that, without achieving non-existence, the sage may yet live a life having some value, is not possible to reconcile with Schopenhauer's pessimism" (726). However frustrating and destructive its pursuit, desire remains, as Nietzsche affirms, the precondition for human life. Unable to find happiness in a consumeristic world in which she is not desirable, Bruno's ugly girlfriend, Annick, reflexively desires to live even as she commits suicide. While falling from her balcony, she "obviously had brought her hands up to her face in a last, desperate reflex to protect herself from the impact" (128). Her suicide alludes to Michel's canary for which the freedom to desire is oppressive. In stark contrast, the collective suicide of the epilogue redefines desire as autonomous from an unbearable telos.

Bruno, as one of the few central characters who does not commit suicide, demonstrates the necessity of desire in contemporary society as much as he exemplifies the impossibility of its utopian satisfaction. According to Michel Biron, "Bruno est, lui aussi," like Raphaël Tisserand in *Whatever*, "un cas pathétique, une loque humaine, mais il n'est pas désespéré autant" (36). Certainly, Bruno's repeated frustration is cause for despair, but his desire for continued pleasure enables him to persevere, "to live to the end, to be part of life,

to fight against physical infirmity and petty everyday misfortunes" (101). Consequently, even as an adult, "Bruno had never seriously thought about death and was beginning to wonder if he ever would" (101). The desire for pleasure allows him to live with hope notwithstanding the ineluctable frustration that his mortality entails.

Bruno's *raison d'être* aside, the novel is no more an apologetics for his quasi-Nietzschean optimism than it is for Michel's apparent pessimism. Death and frustration, as two perennial Houellebecqian themes, remain immanent in Bruno's otherwise revivifying pursuit of pleasure. The forgetting of this paradox as a means to political unity, or interpersonal happiness, amounts to Nietzschean absurdity in the novel. Consider Nietzsche's definition of happiness, which he equates to pleasure:

> The smallest pleasure, if it be only continuous and makes one happy, is incomparably a greater happiness than the more intense pleasure that comes with an episode, a wild freak, a mad interval between ennui, desire, and privation. But in the smallest and greatest happiness there is always one thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned phrase, the capacity of feeling 'unhistorically' throughout its duration. (6)

Forgetting the link between desire and frustration, Bruno, "[w]ith his last breath would still plead for a postponement, to live a little longer" in order to "continue his quest for the ultimate pleasure to the end; one last indulgence" (101). Insofar as he lives for such pleasure, he lives unhistorically, for the sake of life itself.

Even Michel acknowledges that "[h]owever transitory, a good blow-job was a real pleasure and that . . . was something no one could deny" (101). Bruno's fellatory worldview, however, is by definition unproductive and, given its promise of eventual fulfillment, absurd. The New Age camp that he attends accordingly "représente une parodie pathétique de l'esprit soixante-huitard" (Biron 36). His hope for the ultimate pleasure therein is delusory because the intersubjectivity that it advertises is impossible. Bruno's Nietzschean praxis, far from consummative, amounts to political masturbation.

One should note that Houellebecq's link between delusory happiness in sexual pleasure and interpersonal disunity in the political sphere does not hold according to conventional political ideologies. Pervasive French theories, though indebted to Marxism, support the liberal notion that desire can be politically efficacious. John Fiske, for example, describes the evasive potential of American popular culture in Barthesian terms. Not unlike Nietzsche's "power of specifically growing out of one's self" (7), Barthes' concept of *jouissance* becomes, for Fiske, any bodily pleasure that effects "the loss of self" (50). He argues that people who experience *jouissance* are uncontrollable for its duration, as the orgasm typifies. During comparable periods such as inebriation, the body evades and thereby resists the ubiquitous forces of the dominant culture. Such evasion nullifies the function of what Louis Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatuses: schools and other social institutions through which hegemonic values disseminate nonviolently. Analogously, Nietzsche's unhistorical man

resists the alienating forces of History by "making the past and the strange *one body* with the near and present" (my emphasis 7).

Although Fiske's examples are primarily American, one need not look far in French history for instances in which individual pleasure induces collective change. The student riots of May 1968 reveal how the evasive pleasures of many can beget longstanding political ramifications. Even Houellebecq, who condemns *soixante-huitard* ideology as libertarian, "remembers fondly how the strikes of that year briefly paralysed a relentless social machine" (Bowd 30). To this day, French authorities remain beleaguered by civil disobedience, which the November 2005 riots and March 2006 protests demonstrate. With its investment in desire, post *soixante-huitard* ideology more generally complements that of liberal contingency. Desire, whether seditious or systemic, need not be fully consummative in order for its pursuit to be effective politically. In this pragmatic sense, one cannot simply dismiss the pleasure of transient satisfaction as selfish, individualistic, or politically masturbatory.

Itself pragmatic, Houellebecq's philosophy is a discourse whose vocabulary is completely at odds with, but ironically dependent upon, Reason. *The Elementary Particles* challenges sexual/communal unity as a useful telos, believers of which experience its impossibility in the Platonic void between Reality and appearance (of which the opposition between subject and object is a derivative). Those who find solace in Bruno's "brève idylle" with Christiane, during which "pour la seule fois de sa vie, il éprouve un amour véritable," must forget that "celui-ci ne dure guère, comme toutes les relations humaines chez

Houellebecq: peu de temps après leur retour, Christiane souffre d'un cancer et se tue pour éviter d'être un poids pour Bruno" (Biron 36-37). Unable to sustain the evasive pleasures that constitute Nietzschean happiness and Fiskean resistance, their relationship dramatizes the political consequences of the ontological disparity between separate consciousnesses.

With regard to this dramatization, Biron is correct to say that the "statut de Bruno n'est pourtant pas celui d'un personnage secondaire, même s'il n'apparaît pas qu'à la cinquantième page et disparaît bien avant Michel" (36). Although the novel is "principally" (3) the story of Michel, he and Bruno "représent[ent] les deux faces d'une même médaille qui, à la lumière de l'épilogue, se rélève tout entière tournée vers le désastre" (Doré 71). Michel's resignation, from academia and life in general, embodies the disparity between individuals that Bruno's relationships foreground. Despite his love for Christiane, "in reality his body was in a slow process of decay; Christiane's body was too" (167). More to the point, the fact that they "remained trapped in individual consciousness and separate flesh" precludes the intersubjectivity for which they both desire (167). As they make love, the narrator comments that "the most surprising thing about physical love is the *sense* of intimacy it creates the instant there's any trace of mutual affection" (my emphasis 122). Love is but *seeming* intimacy; it is contingent and finite, physical, not metaphysical. In terms of Houellebecq's political project, the importance of Bruno's character is to dispel the metaphysics of desire on which not only liberal but libertarian and communitarian systems depend: the hope that the subject's ontological reality will somehow encompass its disparate object.

Before I return to the epilogue, I wish to develop the point that the novel's challenge to the metaphysics of desire constitutes a challenge to the above political perspectives. Through the character of Bruno, Houellebecq thematizes the perpetual deferral of synthesis, the desired consensus between subject and object that liberals pursue, albeit pragmatically, under Reason. Several critics address the novel's critique of liberalism as they address its representation of desire (among whom Abecassis is exemplary). That said, none, to my knowledge, situates Houellebecq's anti-liberalism within a more general critique of Reason, the common foundation on which libertarians, liberals, and communitarians presuppose the absolute consummation of desire. Unlike Zoyd, whose commitment to the familial Other in *Vineland* solidifies his adherence to liberalism, Bruno, in an effort to reach happiness and sustain it, vainly traverses the three ranges of the conventional political spectrum.

In the first instance, Bruno's libertarianism stems from the hippie lifestyle of his mother, Janine. After his maternal grandmother dies, his parents enroll him in a boarding school in Meaux. Although his father is equally loath to raise him, the implication is that Bruno becomes dependent on the state because his mother (Nature personified) has been an "independent girl" from an early age, having "lost her virginity at the age of thirteen" (20). The libertarian ethos of her villa in Cassis, where he visits her and she "regularly entertained hitchhikers and sundry men passing through," reinforces Bruno's dependence on the state, especially its sexual norms (51). Despite his desire to liberate himself from these norms, even the incest taboo to which his mother insists adherence, he experiences the

biological restrictions of socially unfettered desire, that "fundamental aspects of sexual behavior are innate" (50). Compared to "bigger, stronger, more tanned" boys, a libertarian Bruno is "just not *natural* enough, not enough of an *animal*" (original emphases 51). Raw sexual selection, that adjunct of natural selection, separates him from his objects of desire like the allegorical cage of Reason in *Whatever*: "he was surrounded by the vulvas of young women, sometimes less than a meter away, but Bruno understood that they were closed to him" (51). His expulsion from the hippie community on genetic grounds gives credence to the opinion of Jean Cohen, the headmaster of Meaux who believes that "the ideas manifest in Nietzsche's philosophy – the rejection of compassion, the elevation of individuals above the moral order and the triumph of the will – led directly to Nazism" (38). As this reference underscores, the plight of Bruno as an omega male in a libertarian environment foreshadows the novel's holocaustic conclusion. Unable to meet the criteria for success within its sexual economy, the narcissistic society to which his mother belongs denies him the pleasure of community. Libertarianism inhibits his life, the exertion of his will to be one with his environment.

Though one may read Bruno's sexual inferiority as innate, the novel does not therefore reduce frustration to biological bad luck. Significantly, the characters whom natural selection does favour do not secure the intersubjectivity and attendant satisfaction for which he longs. In contrast to Bruno's failure to attain happiness through sexual encounters, David di Meola pursues libertarian desire to its sadistic extreme. Having conquered Annabelle, the novel's paragon

of beauty whom he beds at his father's commune, he embarks on a murderous quest for "new and more violent sensations," thereby supporting the Macmillan Hypothesis. According to David Macmillan, the novel's advocate for Republican communitarianism, "[h]aving exhausted the possibilities of sexual pleasure, it was reasonable that individuals, liberated from the constraints of ordinary morality, should turn their attentions to the wider pleasures of cruelty" (174). No different, in his view, from other "libertarians who affirmed the rights of the individual against social norms," he argues that the cult's sadism is "not some monstrous aberration in the hippie movement, but its logical conclusion" (175). Indeed, in 1963 and when di Meola is only thirteen, Janine copulates him to liberate his "innate potential" (60). His initiation as a libertarian corroborates Macmillan's contention that "the serial killers of the 1990s [are] the spiritual children of the hippies of the sixties" (174). As the result of his night with Annabelle suggests (she becomes pregnant and has an abortion), libertarianism is as abortive politically for the alpha human as it is masturbatory for the omega.

Lacking the dominative power of di Meola, Bruno eventually checks his own tendency to view others as mere consummative objects of desire. "Much later," and between libertarian lapses, he "would come to realize that the petit-bourgeois world of employees was more accepting, more tolerant, than the alternative scene – represented at that time by hippies" (51). As a husband and high-school teacher in the eighties, he joins the ranks of many disillusioned hippies who make sexual and politico-economic concessions in the hope that happiness lies in greater social stability. Recalling his ex-wife, Anne, he admits

to Michel that she "wasn't really beautiful, but [he] was tired of jacking off" (142). With the logic of a libertarian failure, he relinquishes his investment in the impregnable vulvas that had surrounded him for permanent access to one. Quintessentially pragmatic, their relationship is the sexual equivalent of the liberal middle-ground. When Anne becomes pregnant, they marry in deference to social normalcy, "the usual story" (143) to which her family of "liberal middle-class Protestants" and society in general subscribe (145). Its role in biological and social continuity aside, the metaphysical telos of this storyline does not bring Bruno closer to happiness as he continues to experience its very physical impossibility, the political impossibility of intersubjective consensus. With the birth of his son, he "should've been happy" but instead feels "dead inside" (145). Anne "only wanted to look at baby clothes" (145) but all he "wanted was for some little bitch to put her fat lips around [his] cock" (146). "Later," he explains to Michel, "her tits started to go south and our marriage went with them" (142). Their disparate desires undermine the nuptial assertion that "*they two shall be one flesh*" (143). Their consequent divorce suggests that consensual reciprocity between the body and the body-politic is quixotic. Liberalism, for all its immediate fertility, does not yield the teleological unity towards which faithful adherents work as their own bodies ironically disassemble with age.

So long as he strives to associate desire with its object, Bruno continues to believe in Reason even after he loses faith in two of its socio-political manifestations, libertarianism and liberalism. According to Madeleine Byrne, "the real issue for Houellebecq [in *The Elementary Particles*] is the difficulty

people have associating sex, or pleasure, with love and commitment" (213). At the heart of this difficulty is a more central crux: the impossibility of an essential association (political or sexual) between individuals and the paradox that happiness (the pleasure of intersubjective unity) constitutes this association under Reason. As such, Bruno's dialectic quest for happiness is doomed from the moment that he believes in its possibility. He receives the brunt of this paradox as an omega libertarian, ignores it as a hopeful liberal, and finally advocates its collective circumvention as a communitarian. At the nudist colony where he and Christiane vacation, the "sexual issues had been resolved; it was good to know that each of them would do their best to bring pleasure to the others" (180). Here one experiences the "archetype of a particular sociological concept, which was all the more surprising in that it was the result not of some preestablished plan but the convergence of individual desires" (178). "That, at least," the narrator cautions, "was how Bruno portrayed it in his article 'The Dunes of Marseillan Beach: Toward an Aesthetic of Goodwill,' a distillation of his two-week vacation" (178). The polygamous utopia that he shares with Christiane, like any good vacation, cannot withstand the disappointing return to everyday life. During the height of their seeming happiness, he has "a premonition that it was a bad farce, one last sordid joke life was playing on him" (203). "Unhappiness," the narrator adds, "isn't at its most acute point until a realistic chance of happiness, sufficiently close, has been envisioned" (203). Soon after their vacation, Christiane falls ill with cancer and commits suicide. Just as the magazine, *Esprit*,

narrowly rejects Bruno's article, Houellebecq, notwithstanding his nostalgia for communitarian values, rejects its underlying faith in Reason.

The state in which we find Bruno at the end of the novel acts as a thematic segue to the epilogue's political alternative to Reason. Having traversed the conventional political spectrum, he realizes that "[t]his time all the cards had been dealt, all the hands played, the last one faced-up on the table, and he had lost" (205). Even as a communitarian, he "had no more been capable of love than his [libertarian] parents before him" (205). Incapable of happiness, in other words, he "knew his life was over, but didn't understand the ending" (206). Beyond the delusory light of Reason that had guided his Nietzschean pursuit of desire, "[e]verything was dark, indistinct, and painful" (206). In this state of mental chaos, he admits himself to a psychiatric clinic in Verrières-le-Buisson where he spends the rest of his life. Symbolically, he admits the impossibility of desire, the inadequacy of Reason in the face of Chaos. In this sense, which ironically relies upon the unifying power of the literary symbol, Bruno's resignation after a life-long investment in the desire for intersubjective unity becomes intelligible. With no transcendental telos for which to hope, he "wasn't unhappy; the medication was working, and *all desire was dead in him*" (my emphasis 244). Accepting his transition toward personal chaos, he "expected nothing, now, of the progression of days, and the last night of the second millennium was a pleasant one for him" (244). "All across the surface of the globe," at the socio-political level of which his miserable life is a microcosm, "a weary, exhausted humanity, filled with self-doubt and uncertain of its history, prepared itself as best it could to enter a new

millennium" (245). So begins the "*metaphysical revolution*" by which humanity actively abandons the "*quasi-anthropological perspective*" that had informed its previously "*sad story*" (246-247). Sadness and destruction, moreover, are properties of impossible determinacy.

Just as the main body of *The Elementary Particles* ends with Bruno's psychiatric isolation and the plausible but uncertain suicide of Michel, the epilogue documents their macrocosmic correlative, the mutual end of deterministic desire and human unhappiness. In 2029, twenty years after Michel's mysterious disappearance, "the first member of the new intelligent species made by man 'in his own image'" occurs and the narrator's meta-human era soon follows (262). As the biblical reference suggests, Michel becomes a messianic figure whose self-sacrifice brings about the utopian world to which Hubczejak, his self-professed successor, tirelessly works. Through science, Doré more generally observes, "l'humanité en vient à créer en laboratoire une espèce asexuée et immortelle, théoriquement comblée et parfaitement prospère . . . puis accepte de bon gré de céder la place à sa creature" (70). Returning now to the concern with which I begin this chapter, what is the advantage of such altruism if its recipients are not only non-human, but their polity depends upon the destruction of humanity proper? Indeed, "on aimerait bien apprendre en quoi consiste le bonheur, mais le roman n'en dit pas plus" (70). The pessimism of the novel's literality aside, one may tease out a possible answer – the elusive *bonheur* – from its actual and thematic dénouement.

As a kind of cautionary tale, the holocaustic end of desire in *The Elementary Particles* does not simply defy Reason (the rejection of whose political manifestations constitutes the first challenge of the novel); it gestures, however implicitly, toward a polity whose philosophical foundation is Chaos (the second challenge). The manner in which Labelle contextualizes Castoriadis' reference to Chaos provides a way into his complex philosophy and encapsulates Houellebecq's twofold challenge:

> According to Castoriadis, Athenian democracy rests on a narrative about the origins which opposes 'autonomy' with an insurmountable primal Being defined as 'Chaos.' In this ensemble of representations, the demos appears as a 'form' against the 'formlessness' otherwise known as the Abyss. Modern democratic regimes, on the other hand, presuppose the demos to be the manifestation of reason in its effort to express the meaning of Being. Being thus appears as a 'determinacy' rather than as Chaos. For Castoriadis, this is an illusion which is in part responsible for the current crisis in democracy, the most obvious symptoms of which are the apathy of citizens and the irrational and inequitable use of the planet's resources. (78)

As I have shown, Bruno's desire for intersubjectivity is constitutively frustrated because, in a perpetual state of becoming, he never *becomes* Reason manifest; moreover, he manifests the impossibility of ontological and, as a synecdoche for society, political determinacy. Ironically, in his effort to bridge the divide

between his subjectivity and the world, he loses his individual autonomy, what Castoriadis provisionally defines as "my discourse [which] must take the place of the discourse of the Other, of a foreign discourse that is in me, ruling over me" (*Imaginary Institutions* 102). In willing absolute consummation, Bruno forfeits autonomy to a commonplace idea, the heteronomous discourse of Reason which clashes with his experience. "The decay of his organs was particular to him, and he would suffer his decline and death as an individual" but "his hedonistic worldview and the forces that shaped his consciousness and desires were common to an entire generation" (148). Between his dependency on this collective ideal and his inability to realize it personally, he is but an elementary and transparent particle "caught up in the wave of history" (148). In this sense, the epilogue's technological departure from history is technically a semantic one.

Without particular reference to the opposition between Reason and Chaos, Biron posits semantic transparency as "le cœur du problème du personage chez Houellebecq" (32). "Le personnage contemporain," he argues, "se distingue de ses prédécesseurs par l'extrême connaissance individuelle, mais il a perdu, en revanche, sa volonté proprement individuelle, c'est à-dire ce qui le distingue des autres ou l'oppose à la société" (32). This lack of individual will is the consequence of a transparent collective vocabulary (Reason) that limits the absolute intersubjectivity that it promises. "La dépression déplace radicalement la vieille opposition entre l'individu et la société" (28) because its collective images now compose an insufficient means of self-expression "comme un ensemble limité de possibles" (32). From this awareness of limited intersubjectivity, which

is depressive because Reason presupposes absolute unity, stems the political apathy that Labelle mentions. Thus, a self-reflective Bruno admits to Christiane: "I'm completely dependent on my society, but I play no useful role in it . . . . Most of the people I know are exactly the same. In fact, the only useful person I know is my brother" (168). Michel's character is indeed useful, but not merely as the tropological breach of Reason that I have discussed. Unlike Bruno, whose eventual rejection of Reason exceeds apathy in mental turmoil, Michel reclaims autonomy from a body-politic whose metaphysical telos deprives its physical bodies of happiness. His character transmogrifies the vocabulary of Reason (in which consummation logically follows desire) into one that more usefully aligns itself with the (otherwise paradoxical) experience of frustration.

This replacement, to whose aesthetic form I return, begs an important, extra-literary question. How is a creative vocabulary that opposes itself to Being as Chaos more useful than *pragmatic* Reason, the utopian solution under which is more or less a figurative telos whose value lies in the action that it inspires? Rorty, who himself favours creative over essentialist philosophy, uses essentialist concepts, such as 'truth' and 'consensus,' as linguistic tools with which to construct contingent political solutions. Beyond the restoration of individual autonomy that attends the autonomy/Chaos opposition, insofar as the autonomous subject may dispense altogether with subject-object synthesis and its attendant frustrations, the answer to this question exceeds the literary concerns at hand; furthermore, it requires a more thorough analysis of foundational political theory. That said, a number of related observations in Castoriadis' *The Imaginary*

Institution of Society (1975) shall provide a framework in which to read the epilogue as a metaphorical alternative to its literal proposal. In other words, the novel proposes autonomy against Chaos as it prophesizes destruction under Reason.

To begin with, Castoriadis reminds us that Being "is not and cannot be, absolutely disordered chaos – a term to which, moreover, no signification can be assigned: a random ensemble still represents *as* random a formidable organization" (341). This reminder that language undermines absolute truth-claims should assuage epistemological concerns that arise from what Robert Dion and Élisabeth Haghebaert aptly term the novel's "paradoxal déterminisme de la liberté" (518). "Si donc la science moderne vient mettre un bémol aux rêveries comtiennes," they observe, "cela n'empêche pas Michel d'imaginer une solution positiviste aux problèmes de l'indétermination," for which they adduce his revolutionary "code génétique sous une forme standard structurellement stable" and his effort to "rendre compte scientifiquement de l'acte libre" (518). To contextualize these and other "assez dogmatique[s]" conceptions in the novel, David Rabouin's reference to "le slogan schopenhauerien repris par Houellebecq" is helpful, namely "[l]a première – et pratiquement la seule – condition d'un bon style, c'est d'avoir quelque chose à dire" (48-49). Outside this pragmatic context, desire for autonomy from deterministic desire is bound to appear paradoxical; its very articulation in opposition to Chaos (posited in language as meta-linguistic) depends upon the determinate nature of words. The implications of this postmodern paradox, furthermore, problematize ethical categories whose stability

is of obvious political importance.[8] Martin Crowley argues that the distinction between ironic and complicit essentialism in Houellebecq's novels is ultimately undecidable: "[u]nfortunately, this [ironic] framing is notable for its intermittence; and so it is not even possible to claim that Houellebecq can be redeemed from the charges of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and so on" (21). But to focus on "undecidability" is to focus on the limits of epistemological certainty, which is to overlook what Houellebecq *has to say*, his imaginary alternative, a metaphysical revolution from within Reason's own metaphysical (but frustratingly teleological) borders. In short, *The Elementary Particles* does posit a deterministic alternative to Reason, but any position in language is constitutively deterministic. Rather than irrefutably secure an alternate epistemology, the novel more interestingly redefines the vocabulary of Reason in terms of Chaos in order to reject teleological significations and their frustrating impossibility.

Before I address this imaginary revolution as it unfolds in the novel, it is necessary to define the "imaginary." Castoriadis begins with a commonplace definition: "we speak of 'imaginary' when we want to talk about something 'invented'. . . . [I]t is assumed that the imaginary is separate from the real, whether it claims to take the latter's place (a lie) or makes no such claim (a novel)" (127). As Crowley's use of de Manian terminology reveals, this distinction between the imagination and reality *is* an assumption; veracity in language is *undecidable*. Not unlike "the imaginary source of fiction" that de Man locates in the perceived void between subject and object, reality for

[8] In "Foucault and the politics of difference" (2003), Brian T. Trainor concedes that "postmodernism exhibits a profoundly suspicious attitude towards [the] ethical task [of politics to unify differences] and towards moral principles and normative positions generally.

Castoriadis is not essentially delimitative; one's perception of it is a function of society's collective imaginary (19). Just as de Man considers "literature as a primary source of knowledge" (19), Castoriadis contends that the imagination unconsciously provides answers to fundamental but otherwise unanswerable questions: "Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking?" (146-147). Moreover, the "role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither 'reality,' nor 'rationality' can provide" (147). In contrast to de Man, however, Castoriadis seems to *decide*, necessarily for his own project, that the imagination is *truly* the source of an instituted reality in order to advocate one in which autonomy is possible. "The sole 'norm' consubstantial with the *phusis* of man," namely the imagination that institutes society, "is that man cannot *not* posit norms" ("Done and To Be Done" 375). Thus, he refers to the aforementioned questions and answers "metaphorically," emphasizing that it "is in the *doing* of each collectivity that the answer to these questions appears as an embodied meaning; this social doing allows itself to be understood only as a reply to the questions that it implicitly poses itself" (original emphasis 147). As the representative of his twentieth-century consumeristic society, Bruno's quest for the ultimate pleasure embodies the philosophical foundation from which his desire is implicitly deemed reasonable. Michel's character posits an alternate (but equally imaginary) reality. In the body-politic from which his genetic discovery excises teleology, the body

does not desire the impossible. Frustration, as a consequence, is no longer a politically destructive experience.

"What has he done that's so extraordinary?" Christiane skeptically asks after Bruno asserts that Michel is "the only useful person" (169). Bruno's answer foreshadows the abovementioned revolution that Michel's work expedites:

> He invented a new cow. That's the simplistic way of putting it, but I do know that his research led to the development of genetically modified cows which produce more milk which is of higher nutritional value. He changed the world. I've never done anything, never invented anything – I've contributed nothing to the world. (168)

The cows allude to Nietzsche's ruminate beasts that live unhistorically "from day to day, taken up with their little loves and hates and the mercy of the moment, feeling neither melancholy nor satiety," and upon which man cannot look "without regret, for even in the pride of his humanity, he looks enviously on the beast's happiness" (5). Later, when Michel moves to Ireland to pursue his research on human DNA, he observes, with no regret, the progeny of his creation "grazing calmly, rubbing their heads against each others flanks" (241). In their unhistorical ontology, they lack all teleological desire, let alone an attributive deity who, as in Genesis, sees that his creation is good and purposeful. Thus, "[t]o them he should be like God, but they seemed completely indifferent to his presence" (241). Pathetic fallacy furthermore highlights their foreshadowing function. As Michel leaves the pasture and the field of conventional science in

general (save autonomous contact with the Galway Center for Genetic Research, whose supportive director, Walcott, takes him to view the cows), a "bank of fog rolled slowly down the mountain, gradually shrouding them as it went" (241). By extension, the blissfully productive cows that Michel "had created" or, "at least, he had improved on" prefigure the gradual meta-human takeover that his research in Ireland makes possible (241). Whether or not one reads this takeover as the literal end of humanity or a metaphorical alternative to its self-destructive trajectory, Michel *is* extraordinarily useful; as a character, he constitutes a means by which to redefine the relationship between the body and the body-politic.

With regard to the second interpretive possibility, Michel's Nietzschean cows do not herald a circular return to the unhistorical ontology in which Bruno, in order to act, must *forget* that he is drowning in "an infinite boundless sea whose waves are bright with the clear knowledge of – becoming!" (*Use and Abuse* 70). Indeed, Bruno's acts of forgetting imply the *presence* of the telos of becoming, however imaginary its source, and however much Nietzsche himself describes its destructive unattainability. Nietzsche's passing distinction between forgetfulness and the lack of remembrance underscores this presence:

> even a happy life is possible without remembrance, as the beast shows: but life in any true sense is absolutely impossible without forgetfulness. Or, to put my conclusion better, there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of 'historical sense,' that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture. (7)

In *The Elementary Particles*, this historical sense renders the forgetfulness that Nietzsche proposes unsustainable. Destruction, furthermore, does not wholly lie in self-reflection, as Nietzsche suggests, or even in the "self-destroying union" of such thought and Nietzsche's diametric impulse toward originality by which de Man problematizes total rejection of historical prerogatives (151). In the novel, destruction is the consequence of this union (between self-reflection and forgetfulness) *within* the social imaginary of Reason. Unlike the cow that has nothing to remember, and therefore no unattainable telos to forget, Bruno cannot help but reflect on the incompatibility of teleological desire and actual history. He is "not enough of an *animal*" (51) to sustain an unhistorical mindset in which desire seems consummative, hence his admission to Christiane that his Nietzschean worldview is "[p]retty second-rate Nietzsche at that" (177). He invariably experiences frustration when, emerging from unhistorical thought, he remembers the social promise of consummation only to realize its impossibility. Insofar as their happiness is freedom from this remembrance, the cows foreshadow the autonomous social imaginary that the meta-human beneficiaries of Michel's work dramatize.

Since this metaphysical revolution occurs within language, its vocabulary shares certain assumptions with that of Reason, most prominently the opposition between reality and imagination that the novel redefines rather than removes. The literal end of biological evolution in the epilogue is, moreover, a metaphor for the eradication of teleological evolution from the collective imaginary by which humans make sense of their reality. In this sense, the "most radical of

Djerzinski's proposals" is not so much "that mankind must disappear and give way to a new species which [is] asexual and immortal, a species that [will have] outgrown individuality, separation and evolution," but the philosophical refoundation that these themes suggest (258). With regard to such a philosophical refoundation, "the defenders of revealed religion" and "traditional humanists" reject "the idea out of hand," namely that human history does not really end in utopian fulfillment but in death itself. From its future standpoint, the asexual narrator explains how Christianity, Islam, and humanism had resistively accorded the body "'personal freedom,' 'human dignity' and 'progress,'" the "confused and arbitrary nature of [which] ideas meant, of course, that they had little practical or social function – which might explain why human history from the fifteenth to the twentieth century was characterized by progressive decline and disintegration" (258-9). "Only Buddhists," with their lack of investment in desire, "demurred, noting that all of the Buddha's teachings were founded [not on desire but on] the awareness of the three impediments of old age, sickness and death" (258). Thus, "the Enlightened One, if he had meditated on it, would not necessarily have rejected a technical solution" (258). The technical alternative to religious and philosophical teleology that Houellebecq depicts, though scientifically plausible, more generally conveys the "idea that humanity in its current state could and should control the evolution of the world's species – and in particular its own evolution" (259). In this manner, Houellebecq envisions a future society in which citizens *determine* their relationships, with each other and the world, with autonomous creativity from a predetermined, untenable telos.

Conclusion

Of the three comparable points on which my analysis of *Vineland* and *The Elementary Particles* rests (frustrated desire, Reason, and the body/body-politic motif), there is a related fourth to which I have referred implicitly: the symbolism of familial change. *Vineland* begins with Vond's renewed assault on Zoyd's already fragmented family and concludes with Sasha's annual family reunion. Father, mother, and daughter finally reunite, free of Vond's influence, in Vineland Bay's "Harbour of Refuge" (316), a Twainian "final American frontier where the rights of individuals and the rights of society accomplish mutual accommodation" (Varsava 89). Contrapuntally, as Varsava's analysis corroborates, the novel lays out the problem of Leftist disunity upon which right-wing communitarian essentialism capitalizes and from which consensual reciprocity gradually emerges as a pragmatic liberal solution to the frustrations of post-sixties and postmodern America. In comparison, the familial progression to which *The Elementary Particles* bears witness is increasingly and irreversibly divisive. Although Bruno and Michel meet for the first time during their adolescence and intermittently correspond and visit each other as adults, their final rendezvous by the death-bed of their mother reflects the demise of humanity under Reason that is Houellebecq's thesis.

During Bruno's and Michel's anticlimactic reunion, after which "they would never see each other again," they have an interesting conversation that encapsulates Houellebecq's philosophical response to bodily/political frustration

(216). Michel begins by expressing his frustration after an attempt to discern Janine's medical condition from a digressive, old hippie:

> "Fucking hippies . . ." he said as he sat down again. "They're still convinced that religion is some sort of individual experience based on meditation, spirituality and all that. They don't understand that, on the contrary, it's a purely social activity about rites and rituals, ceremonies and rules. According to Auguste Comte, the sole purpose of religion is to bring humanity to a state of perfect unity."
>
> "Auguste Comte yourself!" interrupted Bruno angrily. "As soon as people stop believing in life after death, religion is impossible. If society is impossible without religion, which is what you're saying, then society isn't possible either. [. . .]" (212-213)

As this passage foregrounds, Comtean absolutism informs the narration of the novel, providing a strategic framework through which Houellebecq parodies the determinacy of Reason in modern democracies and articulates his non-teleological alternative. In "The Positive Philosophy and the Study of Society," Comte reasons that "each of our leading conceptions – each branch of our knowledge – passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological, or fictitious; the Metaphysical, or abstract; and the Scientific, or positive" (75). Unbeknownst to Bruno, his gradual loss of faith in utopian satisfaction corresponds to the final condition in which "the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions, [such as] the origin and destination of the

universe" (75). The prototypical scientist, Michel had long ago shed the teleological desires of his childhood for rational inquiry, whence stems his observation that "any attempt at fusing science and religion is doomed by the knowledge of physical mortality, so cruelty and egotism cannot fail to spread" (134). This assessment of modern society is hardly optimistic so long as citizens have faith in its philosophical foundation. By metaphorizing Comte's Positive system, however, Houellebecq implies that society is not necessarily doomed to follow its present path, under Reason, toward self-destruction. As dramatized in the epilogue, science-fiction may substitute a new social imaginary for the teleological narrative of modern democracy, the impossibility of which, as a kind of religion, Bruno's life and above comment unwittingly confirm.

Insofar as *The Elementary Particles* problematizes the desire for utopian fulfillment, its utopian conclusion, though manifestly pessimistic for humanity, metaphorically proposes philosophical refoundation as an optimistic solution to the problem of frustrated desire. Houellebecqian optimism thus presupposes that pessimism prevails under Reason, that progress toward an unobtainable end is inherently destructive, that the desire for absolute intersubjectivity either fosters apathy or exasperates frustration, that transient life, moreover, is not worth living within a narrative that undermines its own promise of eternal joy. "It's a curious idea," Michel admits to Annabelle, "to reproduce when you don't even like life" (227). "You make a baby or you don't," the omniscient narrator adds, "it's not a decision one can make rationally" (227). Though it feels "like a little suicide," Michel acquiesces to Annabelle's request that they have child, which actualizes

his other observation that love "bizarrely" attends the consciousness of mortality as well as egotism and cruelty (134). But just when happiness seems possible for them as it had for Bruno and Christiane, Annabelle is diagnosed with cervical cancer and her subsequent hysterectomy necessitates an abortion. In stark contrast to the beauty of her youth, her body "could no longer be a source of joy or pleasure," only "of pain and embarrassment to her and others," for which "life seemed to her like a bad joke, an unacceptable joke" (231). Being "far from accepting," she joins the ranks of other characters who commit suicide because "acceptable or not, that was what [life] *was*" (my emphasis 231). As the past tense suggests and the epilogue later verifies, human life *was* impossible in teleological terms.

Like *The Elementary Particles*, *Vineland* also parodies utopian fulfillment, as the potential but ambiguous victory for liberalism over Vond demonstrates. Prairie nearly believes his Darth Vader-like assertion that he is her true father "despite what she knows about his and her mother's past" (Hume 438). Within the context of postmodernism, however, absolute notions of identity and love are not important *per se*. As simulacra, they are impossible, hence Zoyd's idealized love for Frenesi that vainly persists even after their divorce and, alternately, Prairie's filial love for him in spite of her inability to ascertain her true, unmediated familial history. Moreover, "Pynchon does not place much value on romantic or sexual love, but he is clearly interested in a more detached, generalized kind of love and loyalty among people" (438). Pynchonian optimism accordingly reflects the liberal willingness to accommodate others and thereby

work toward a body/body-politic reciprocity that never *essentially* arrives. Thus, Pynchon may seem "less sure than Mailer that knowing the past will make a difference," for which Hume adduces Prairie's above temptation, but the very fact that she is "deflected from this capitulation only by Brock's death and by her family's reunion" reflects the imperfect but progressive consensus that Pynchon and Rorty advocate (438). Just as Sasha and her family give Zoyd a second chance because of his obvious care for Prairie, the Traverse-Becker reunion to which they invite him symbolizes the second chance that the New Cultural Left and the Reformist Old Left must give each other if Rortyan liberalism is to raise itself from the dead.

However much life after death is literally utopian, and therefore an untenable goal for Bruno and the postmodern society of which he is synecdochical, the theme of resurrection is central to *Vineland*'s equally postmodern politics. In her introduction to "Books of the Dead: Postmortem Politics in the Novels by Mailer, Burroughs, Acker, and Pynchon" (2000), Hume enumerates four reasons for which these American authors invoke the "alien otherworlds" of the Egyptian and, in Pynchon's case, Tibetan texts. First, these texts provide a metaphor for the politically dead Left in America that, secondly, does not separate life from death "in the manner engrained in Western thought" (418). Third, they provide a model of a soul that is not static in death and, fourth, a consequent "link between postmortem metaphysics and these authors' politics" (418). Hume does not draw the teleological comparison between the West's main religion, Christianity, and Reason on which modern democracies operate, but her

second and third reasons reaffirm the postmodern, as opposed to postlapsarian, context in which Pynchon creatively frames his liberal pragmatism. In this context, moreover, the "soul [that] is the prison of the body" and "the effect and instrument of a [given] political anatomy" is *not* the historical constant that Foucault implies (30). As the sequestered Traverse-Becker reunion illustrates, the body can remove itself from an oppressive body-politics. With regard to Hume's first and fourth reasons, the metaphoric dead in America may therefore hope for new life, which supports Rorty's call for reconciliation and unity among Leftists as a solution to their political deadness.

In advocating liberal consensus, *Vineland* thus offers a very different alternative to political apathy and frustration, which characterize postmodern disbelief in Reason, than the refoundation alternative in *The Elementary Particles*. Several critics dismiss Houellebecq's revolutionary flair as misanthropic exhibitionism at worst and literarily unoriginal at best. Katherine Gantz, for example, focuses on the *fin-de-siècle* elements in the novel, notably the act of *flânerie*, and concludes that "there is not much terribly novel about this novel" (150). Even its "austere and obscene" components are "facilitated by the presence of the often nostalgic decadent" (150). Franc Schuerewegen, however, draws an interesting parallel between the pervasive pornographic content in the novel and its thematic function: "*to ejaculate* signifie aussi en *Oxford English* « affirmer», « énoncer» . . . . L'éjaculateur est donc, entre autres, à en croire ces exemples, un locuteur, voire une sorte de littérateur" (47). The masturbatory politics of *The Elementary Particles* indeed give voice to a new, non-

heteronomous vocabulary by which to conceive the relationship between the body and society. It is in this philosophical sense that its place among the texts of literary postmodernism in general, and *Vineland*'s pragmatic liberalism in particular, deserves critical recognition.

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